

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS



BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Edited
By

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COVER ART

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GRAPHICS

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Workday Thoughts

Neil Leckman

We all have days we do our chores
Often in secret behind closed doors
Mopping the blood scrubbing the goo
So nobody can get wise to you
There are many who are hard to the core
Hiding there behind a closed door
Be careful what it is you look for
Or you'll be seen never more...

Freedom

A.A. Garrison

The subway was crowded, and Martha said so, loudly.

“Crowded! People! Too many!” She made an equine pffft, spit flying. “Can feel ‘em everywhere! Pffft.”

Rusty made no response. He led his blind sister through the throng, people zippering apart for them.

“I jus’ stepped in somethin’, eww,” Martha declared. She stopped and shook one foot wildly.

Rusty said, “Was only a wrapper,” and hurried her on. In addition to being blind, Martha was retarded to some degree never measured.

The train came and they boarded, Rusty leading her daintily by the hand as she commented on various things. There was one seat and so he sat her and then stood beside, swaying with the turns. The person next to her soon left and Rusty sat too.

“Someone this way stinks,” Martha announced, pointing right.

“Now, that’s not nice,” Rusty said, passing his eyes about the stone-faced people.

“But they do! Stinks! Pffft.”

Rusty only patted her small hand. He was tall and too thin and appeared older than his thirty years. Martha was younger, wearing a long red overcoat and the wraparound glasses of her kind. Martha spoke; no one else said a word.

People passed, children stopping to stare and then tugged away. Those sitting nearby read books or papers or drink bottles, whatever lay at hand. Rusty reacted only to his sister’s insults or demands. He seemed blind, also.

Then their stop was up and they were toiling out, Martha’s voice drifting small.

Afterward, the people exchanged looks.

~~~

Their apartment was just large enough to echo her.



Martha commanded the couch opposite Rusty, who was on his recliner. They would hold these posts for hours, mornings, afternoons. It was the same as when their parents were alive, just without their parents.

Her Braille books would yield one-sided conversations. “Yeah and that's good, but ... yeah, good ... no! no! He's lying! Liar! ...Pffft!”

Rusty stayed with her always, like all these years. He'd taken up drawing and took this time to draw, his small easel at length from her as not to be kicked. She babbled as he drew a castle; a loaded train; the city by dusk. The closet held stacks of canvas from much of this. No one had ever seen them, or ever would.

Rusty used to go out at night after putting her to bed. He would walk the lightshow streets, observing that world denied to him. He had dared bars, but only one drink and no women, because of Martha, because of Martha. He would come away from these safaris with a sense of displacement, as oil must feel when the water leaves it.

Still they were enjoyable, but then he would return and feel her sick gravity, a thing that could manifest in violence. Their door was wooden and unlocked, but the apartment was no less a cell.

He stayed in, now.

~~~

Winter again, some weekday. She slept in their one bedroom; him stretched over the couch she would occupy by day. At morning, he arose to a reveille of complaint and pffft.

She'd shit herself again. He went through the rote of correction, detaching her from the bed and gathering the soiled sheets, wiping down the rubbers beneath. Martha came next, then in the bathroom as he stripped her methodically. She raised her arms when she knew to, veteran to this. Free of her sexless undergarments, she appeared almost as a woman, with a vacant, unknowing beauty. She stared skyward and jabbered as Rusty worked; those cataracted eyes. He showered her vigorously, then his own hands and forearms in the same stream.

Then came breakfast and the couch, her books, the hours. They ran errands that afternoon, appearing alienated and small. On the way home, Rusty noticed something in a music store window.

He stopped, Martha continuing several full steps before jerking the tether of their hands. “Hey, what's the, hey?” she said in Rusty's general direction.

“No, hold on. I need to go someplace.”

“Okay!” she cried, garnering faces. “Okay!” Her hands swatted air.

Rusty stood her out of the way with their groceries, then lashed her to a handrail, using a leather whang kept for just this. She was laughing as he went inside the music store.

The isolation headphones in the window were ten dollars. The owner said drummers used them, very good. Rusty came out with a bag.

Martha was talking to someone only she could see. He freed her from the rail, reclaimed the groceries, then took the subway as usual. Once home, she went back to the couch and her books without being led, at once conversing with the people contained within. Rusty unwrapped the headphones and put them on.

They were as good as advertised, allowing only a muffled mmm mmm mmm.

~~~

Inclement snows saw them home in the tenement apartment, often for days on end. Martha was a full-time job and paid a monthly check, so Rusty didn't leave for work, ever. He barely noticed the snow.

Some weeks into this, he suddenly looked up from his drawing, her damaged eyes not looking back. Very quietly, he left the recliner and drew forward, creeping, until just inches away. She talked still, a dumbshow in the silence of his headphones. He passed a hand across her face, and she kept on.

He made faces at her. Gestured. Clapped. Exposed himself.

Oblivity.

As slowly, he retreated from her and into his chair, making no sound. He watched her, his drawing staying interrupted. Martha's hands eagerly scanned the Braille.

~~~

Snowing, still. Martha rambled as Rusty shaved his head.

He gazed into his easel, a mirror there like a picture. Precision swipes of Father's antique straight razor. Each maneuver brought away white foam with a coarse stropping noise. It felt right, the shaving; the idea had arrived in the hell that was his dreams. She'd asked of the noise and he'd said it was the snow.

Without headphones, he could hear her: "That's funny! I think he likes you but pfffft! Funny!"

He scratched away some more hair.

"Kansas, I'm going there someday. I think I'll go there someday and..."

Scratch.

"Denny? What 'bout you? Kansas?"

Scratch.

She laughed - a scathing, rankling laugh. It stopped Rusty mid-swipe, the razor not lowering: that laughter, when he hadn't for so long, might never again.

She didn't stop laughing. The blade pressured. By the time she quieted, blood was running down.

Rusty completed the swipe and then looked into the mirror, appraising the newly bald man there. Blood masked half his face. He turned his head twice, neither pleased nor displeased. The razor shivered shut.

After cleaning up, he put the headphones back on.

~~~

They had a neighbor that visited infrequently, a large, warm woman who showed interest in Martha. Through his headphones, Rusty just heard her knock.

"What'd you do to your head, Rusty?" was the first thing the neighbor asked.

"Shaved it," he said, in the jamb.

"Yeah, but..." The woman gestured vaguely. "What about there?"

"Cut it. Shaving."

The neighbor lady looked at him. He looked back. His eyes were tragic, inflected, staring through her and all else.

He stepped from the door. She came in.

The neighbor visited with Martha like she did, Martha answering or not, hands glued to her Braille. After a gift of chocolates, the neighbor turned her attention to Rusty.

“She been a handful lately?”

Rusty said, “No,” but there must have been something in his eyes.

The neighbor shifted her footing. “Just remember this, Rusty: the obstacle is the path. You ever heard that?”

Rusty said he hadn't.

“You know what it means?”

Rusty said he didn't.

“Means sometimes, there's a reason for things.”

She left.

Rusty put his headphones back on.

~~~

Deep into that final winter, the snow never-ending. He watched Martha on the couch, a sketch pad bridging his knees. The picture was of her, in charcoal, that hateful couch too. As he watched, the rage came up and the pencil angled, gashing the paper. His hand whitened, trembling.

On its own, his pencil raised up and drew speech-bubbles from Martha's head: “I ruined your life.” “I'm a vampire.” “I deserve to die.” “Kill me, please.”

Rusty paid particular attention to the last, those owl eyes scanning it twice and three times. “Yes,” he said aloud, eventually. “Okay, sure, Martha. I will.”

Martha made no reply.

Bedtime. He dressed her down, changing her into her PJ's and helping with her brushing and bathroom. Martha was a warm mannequin.

He laid her down and said goodnight, but left the light on. He stood over her, very quiet. When Martha's breathing deepened, he came closer.

She made no reaction as he leaned down, his shadow devouring her fully. He extended both hands and connected the thumbs, diving for her neck, but stopped just before contact. Do. Don't. Do. Her breath teased the webs of his thumbs.

Kill me, please.

He pulled back as clandestinely and killed the light instead. He left the bedroom.

Back in the recliner, Rusty shaved his head anew.

~~~

He never decided to do it. The act was involuntary, like breathing while asleep.

It was night and like any other, when he stood from the recliner and peeled off the headphones and said “Martha.”

She babbled on from the couch, at one with her books.

“Martha?”

She spoke, but not to him.

“I’m going to kill you, Martha.” He waited. “Do you understand?”

“Pffft.”

He stood for a heartbeat longer, then time kind of skipped. All at once, he was strangling, his hands brutal around her neck. She fought only when the air stopped and even then only generally. The dead eyes bulged and seemed momentarily to see her murderer, then her pulse silenced.

Rusty unraveled his hands and stepped back, assessing his work. When he determined it was not a dream, strange locks in him turned, unopened for decades or life and it brought a feeling like Christmas. It culminated in an erection of the likes he'd never known.

~~~

The time after was not as he'd hoped.

The world was, inconceivably, unchanged in the face of his freedom, still prohibiting happiness. He walked the streets alone, but could still feel her trailing him, still hear her babbling. Pffft. The passing faces had neither softened, nor lost their wretchedness, each fixing him with the same cruel stares. The distance between him and them had not lessened. Rusty's perplexity was sincere.

A day of this and he returned to the apartment and shaved bald and held down the recliner. He hadn't disposed of the body; the scene remained identical but for his sister's unliving. He'd killed the heat for reasons of preservation. Snow rapped gamely the apartment's one window.

Rusty sat, breathing. His mind had started that skipping again and didn't stop. Hours turned to minutes and vice versa, or anomalous new measures of time. Things gained life when seen from the corner of his eye. He studied the strangled corpse that was Martha, shaving his head though it didn't need it.

"Martha?" he said in a white burst.

Martha stayed dead.

"I miss you, Martha." He looked her up and down, her housedress clean and styleless. "I'm sorry I killed you."

When she didn't answer, he swiped the razor hard, taking more skin than hair.

"Do you hate me?"

The words made four white clouds like comic book characters, the only movement save for the snow's wandering tinks.

"Martha?"

For a split second he saw her jaw twitch; but that was all.

~~~

"Martha?"

Snow over the window, noise in the hallway.

"Martha?"

Rusty's pulse in his ears.

"Martha?"

The clocks ticked in perfect sync.

"Please come back." He scratched his head idly. "Martha? Please?"

He waited, several times seeing the beginnings of an answer maybe. Time skipped, as it did now, minutes or hours passing like a heartbeat.

"Martha?" he said, many times.

~~~

It took days of asking, but she finally honored his request.

Rusty was dozing, sort of, unmoved like the corpse - when Martha rose up and straightened her dress. She spoke his name, for the first time:

"Rusty!"

He shocked awake or so he thought; a strange bald wraith breathing steam-engine white. He'd never restored the heat. "Martha," was all he could say. "Martha."

Her eyes remained white. She walked straight and true, with a womanly grace she'd never shown. "You killed me," she said, the voice now free of impediment. "Killed your poor sister."

Rusty only watched her, naked to the waist, his knees balled against the cold. Now that she was back, he wasn't sure if he wanted it, or if he weren't just asleep or hallucinating or insane. She watched him back, intelligently, as he used to her.

"You really back, Martha?" he asked.

She only gathered up his straight razor from where he'd left it, on her Braille books.

"Martha?"

She held the razor to her undead eyes, studying speculatively. "Killed me, Rusty." She drew the blood caked razor; swung it closed. "Your poor sister."

Rusty shook his head a little. "I jus'. I jus' wanted free. Freedom."

"*Freedom?*" she said, changing shape. "I'll tell you about freedom, brother." She bent to him and he recoiled. "Would you like to hear about freedom?"

Rusty made noises that equated to "yes."

She turned away, her hands knit proudly behind her back. "We're born into this world, seeking pleasure and rejecting that which hinders it - rejecting the *ugly* and the *painful* and the *inconvenient*. And we call that freedom." Her head shook despite the broken neck. "Lies. That's illusion, bondage. Beauty is an addiction. And it all comes through *these*." Martha indicated the eyes that shouldn't see.

Rusty's head shook on its own. "I don't ..."

"*Do you want to be free, brother?*" she asked, her words coming from everywhere at once, like any hallucination.

He turned the question over in his mind; then said he did.

Martha said, "Okay, then," and told her brother how to be free. She held out the razor and he took it.



The neighbor was named Kathy and had lived in the building longer than most tenants had been alive. She knocked on Rusty's door, waited a considerate time and then knocked again, insistent now. Martha, who'd gained a certain fame on this floor, had gone quiet last week.

Just when Kathy was ready to pound, "*Come in!*" struggled through the door, just heard. The feeble voice only deepened Kathy's concern.

The doorknob was icy cold and the same frigidness poured through when she opened up. A smell came, too; though smothered by the refrigerated air, it was offensive.

"Rusty?" Kathy said without entering. She tried to see in but it was dark. "Rusty? It's so cold."

A murmur answered her, unintelligible. She entered warily, not closing the door.

Rusty and Martha were on the couch, back-turned, Martha in the spot she never seemed to leave. Kathy neared, rubbing her elbows.

"Rusty? Martha? Your heat out ...?"

She trailed off as she circled the couch. She saw Martha first, in a slump suggestive of drunkenness or injury. Rusty was nude but for sweatpants, his torso salmon-colored with cold. He wore a headband over his eyes and ears.

"Rusty? Your clothes. Why...?"

"Kathy," he said. His jaw just opened, as if needing oil. "Hi."

"What in the...?" She looked between him and Martha, mute with aghast. His headband had two maroon stains where the eyes would be.

Kathy had begun more questions, when she discovered the razor and the eyeballs. They sat over the coffee table like a meal, in a pool the color of Rusty's headband.

He stayed sitting as she screamed off and still when they came for him. Later, when he'd thawed, he smiled and spoke of freedom.

Deadly Slumber

Dene Bebbington

My subject is still not ready. It's hard to be patient, but I mustn't get ahead of myself and ruin the scene.

Finally, a flicker of his eyes. He's coming round. I've been waiting nearly three hours for the drug to wear off, killing time by answering fan emails and gathering the tools.

“Ah, you're awake at last.”

“Ugh. Where am I? Why can't I move? And my groin, it's so painful,” the man says groggily, pulling at the restraints and looking at his naked body.

If there's one thing I can't stand it's the sight of a man's genitals, so I removed those horrible little things earlier. I had to wash my hands twice even though I'd used gloves to handle his grotty little beast with two backs.

“If you could move you might try to escape and that would be no good for my career. I take a lot of risks to turn out each new piece of work.”

He wrenches his whole body in a coordinated movement, but the plastic clips don't give way. They're great little things, effective yet cheap. The harder he tries to pull free the better – it increases the authenticity and rawness of my work. I think I'll call this piece “Deadly Slumber”. The rusty old bed frame he's strapped to was a good find, it suits the aesthetic more than a shiny new one.

The man lifts his head up. “Christ! What are you going to do?” he says shrilly, now he's noticed my tool tray and his missing tool.

“Do stop talking. Can't you understand that your gabbling is distracting me?” I reply. From past experience I know that taping his mouth will only lessen my inspiration.

“What the fuck is this? Please let me go. Please!” he says, then wails like a baby. They always do.

Hmm, shall I start with the scalpel, drill or hammer? The man's eyes widen further. No doubt he'd piss himself if I hadn't cauterised the wound. At least that'll reduce the mess I have to clean up later.

“Hold on,” he says in between hyperventilated breaths. “You're Jerome Ryman, the guy who does all those macabre paintings.”

“That's right!” It's nice to have someone who's familiar with the art world. You wouldn't believe how many of my models think I'm just another sicko killer.

Poor guy, he looks crestfallen. They always do when they realise they're in the presence of a genius. The critics and fans, they all think I have a bizarre imagination – a blood and guts version of H.R. Giger, you might say. It wouldn't do to disabuse them of that misconception. I do have an imagination, but I need to work from real life. Only the models' faces need to come from my mind.

It took me eight hours to inflict the right changes on the man and paint his bed scene. Sadly, this isn't my best piece of work. For some reason he didn't quite inspire me as much as usual. Even so, I think it'll sell for a nice figure, probably enough to pay the bills for another year. I've still got confidence that one day I'll turn out a masterpiece, one which will sell for at least six figures so I can retire from being an artist. After all, acquiring muses and then disposing of them really is very awkward and tiresome.

Behind Closed Doors

Matthew Wilson

Thank God for ebay. On it a boy could buy anything from ninja swords to moon rock. Tyler had wanted nothing more high tech than a Japanese inner engine. Small as a pocket watch but the height of their technology. He made sure the coast was clear and pulled the box out from under his bed. Mom would think he had naughty mags under there the way he acted like a sentry guard. Keeping her out.

His parents had no time for him since their separation. Since the arguments and the beatings. It seemed like he was always at fault. Always in the way. His father saw the money he needed to survive a drain on his alcohol resources. Mom only saw his father in him. One day he would grow to break a good woman's heart and in him she poured all her venom. There seemed no love in this house. But that was fine.

For Tyler had Robbie.

He had been working on his new friend for a while now. Over the Christmas period, better paid kids had grown bored of their many, better toys and thrown out parts he had raided their trash bins for. Mom had taken one look at his torn school clothes and beat him with her belt.

"Tyler, the school bus will be here soon. I hope you're ready!" It was a banshee screamed from downstairs. Keen to get him out from under her feet. Tyler tried not to shout back for then he would burst. He was so excited, today was the day. He had been hungry for so long, saving the pennies his parents gave him for food He had the Japanese inner engine.

Now his friend had a heart. He sat the robot up and pressed 'play'.

For a moment nothing happened and Tyler's insides hurt. He had worked so hard, slept so little. Was it all for nothing? Then Robbie's glass dead eyes burned red. He blinked once, twice.

"Hello," Robbie smiled. "What would you like to play today?"

Tyler gave a silly clap as if squishing a bug in the air, bouncing up and down like he had sat upon a tack.

"Tyler! Am I talking to myself, boy? Move it!" Mom screamed and Tyler pressed the knife into Robbie's hand.

Originally he had wanted someone to talk to. To play tag and go fishing. But this was more important. Vital for his own survival.

“Oh, Robbie. I need your help. I want you to kill my parents.”

Robbie blinked his large stupid eyes and looked at the knife. Processing the information.

His new friend was his maker. What kind of pal would he be not to owe him a favour?

Finally Robbie smiled and headed for the door. Yes, he could do that.

Cut and Paste

Ken L Jones

The old cartoonist had been sick in the hospital for quite a while before they transferred him to a very low key down to earth care facility that was right around the corner from his house. Never having been in any kind of medical situation like this before, he felt extremely ill at ease and uncomfortable while trying to recover from the multiple age related problems that he had.

The hospital he had first been in had been very sterile and there wasn't much in the way of art there or anything interesting like that but this new place was its polar opposite. It reminded him very much of a summer camp he went to in grade school in the sense that crafts and lively arts of all kinds were encouraged there as part of the healing process. Since he was the only famous professional artist that had ever been a patient there, everyone was constantly asking him questions about artwork, both the staff and the other residents there and he was glad to discuss it with them.

The first few days he was flat on his back in bed because what had originally sent him to the hospital was an accident; he fallen down and didn't get up for a long time but as he was finally coaxed out of his sickbed for therapy and began to move around the environs of the facility by wheelchair and on a walker, he noticed how art of all kinds greeted him everywhere. There were wonderful murals that some talented itinerant artist had done. They were displayed throughout the building, most of which were bible scenes appropriately depicting Christ healing the sick. Semi-professional art of all kinds hung in frames everywhere and in every room there were simple crude looking collages that the patients must have constructed.

As he began to feel better and was recovering sufficiently, the activities lady approached him and asked him if he would be a guest instructor at their weekly art sessions. He was flattered by this because he found everybody so agreeable at this place and so he said yes and wondered at what kind of art lessons he might give to such a group of students. Remembering the collages he had seen, he thought he might see if they wanted to get involved in that on a more complex scale.

He instructed his wife to retrieve a certain old steamer trunk. They had put it into storage two decades ago when his parents had passed away.

She was puzzled by the request but did as he asked. A couple of days later, when she came to visit him, the big friendly janitor, Manuel, brought the trunk into the old artist's private room. After his wife left and he had finished his dinner, instead of watching TV as he normally did, he opened the trunk which contained nothing but collages. He set them on his hospital tray next to his bed and began looking through the giant pile. What he encountered there immediately rang a bell in his memory even though he hadn't looked at them in over fifty years. They were his own earliest collages from when he was very young, about two hundred of them. They were thick with the things that he had pasted in there many years before. Having nothing better to do he studied them one by one. He was amazed at how professional and seamless they looked. Seeing them again he had to admit that he had created something that could almost be called a separate reality or an altered state because there was something magical about the juxtaposition within them.

Then he remembered that just as many as he had kept, he had given away twice that many all through the years. God knew where they were or even if they still existed at all. Since he didn't have a lot of spare money back then for traditional presents, he used to give them out as gifts for birthdays and Christmas and people seemed to really prize getting them. Back then it had just been something that he had enjoyed doing and could do easily and cheaply but at a certain point in the process of creating them he realized by the people's reaction to them that he could actually make a living at being an artist of some kind.

The most serendipitous part of this whole process was how all that he needed to do these collages magically fell into his hands. Since he did not drive, he walked everywhere and, as he had since he was young, he would study every vacant lot and trash can and place where things were discarded as he did so and he would find the most amazing items. He constantly found scraps of wood for the backing for his collages and early on he came across a ancient pair of antique scissors that were perfect for cutting out the pictures he used. Most of all he found magazines of every kind; not just the ordinary Time and Life and Saturday Evening Post type of affairs but strange magazines that few others even knew existed and which gave his collages something very different once he was done with them. The only out of pocket expense back then was the Elmer's glue to hold it all together and even that was not very expensive so the collages just flowed, as did the

years until by the time he was in college, he had become a proper artist with brushes and pencils but still he spent a lot of his spare time making his unique collages.

So when he prepared to give his first art lesson to the other patients, everyone showed up. Pieces of typing paper were provided for backing; scissors were passed around and a box of old magazines that everyone had read once too many times was produced in the rec. room. Everybody, including him, proceeded to make a collage. At the end of the session he collected them together, took them back to his room and studied them as he lay in bed.

He sighed sadly as he went through them; he thought that all of them were weak and substandard and, after giving it some thought, realized that the problem lay in the pedestrian and lame the magazines that they had used. He vowed to do something different for the next lesson. He asked his wife to go into his artist's studio at home and to bring him four or five cardboard boxes with removal lids that he had in a certain corner there. When these were produced at the next art session a great excitement went through the crowd when they began to paw through their various contents. These boxes were his scrap files and he had used them as reference when he used to draw comic books. While they weren't in any kind of exact order, they contained everything you could imagine in terms of pictorial content. Some of it was extremely old and all of them were unusual. There was everything there from the Sistine Chapel to dozens and dozens of torn out pages from comic books and, as one of the other patients commented that day, "It was as if the whole universe was contained in these boxes."

He hobbled from table to table on his walker, very pleased with the quality and imagination that this new material was enabling these people to express in their work. As they worked he told them all of his deepest thoughts about collages. He told them the strange and mystical things that famous collage artists had said about that medium over the years. He invoked the name of such great creators of them as Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Hoch and William S. Burroughs. Then he told them his darkest deepest artistic secret that he thought there was something peculiar about doing collages that almost made one like God. He further said that he believed that God himself had probably originally created everything in the universe as some kind of a collage and that if you mastered the art of it you might be able to actually alter reality itself by doing so.

He did not notice, as he was saying this, that several of the nurses and attendants were eavesdropping on him and that they thought there was something very wrong with not only him thinking this but with him filling the other poor patients' heads, many of whom were never going to leave here, with such strange thoughts which were going to lead to nothing but trouble and general unhappiness for them.

At the end of the art session he quickly collected everyone's finished projects and took them back to his room. Studying them, he noticed that there was indeed something magical about them which made it very evident that his new friends had taken his philosophy of collaging very seriously. Down to the last one each of them had created a beautiful world of their own that was exactly the way they liked it to be and he thought that it was very wonderful of them to do so.

After eating a big dinner that night he fell asleep and dreamt strange dreams of the Mary Celeste sailing ship, the very first island colony in America at Roanoke and of other places where large numbers of people had vanished forever. He had no idea why he had done so because he had never given any thoughts to that subject before. During his deep sleep he did not realize that all the night shift attendants and nurses had slept even more deeply than he did, even though it was strictly forbidden for them to do so.

Early the next morning a great commotion rocked the whole care facility. Looking up and down the halls he saw that somehow everyone who was a patient in the place had vanished or had been taken away in the night by someone or something and somehow everyone who worked at the place had not been aroused by any of this. He joined in with the general search but nothing turned up and no one ever did. All the other forty-five patients who were there were gone and never heard of again.

Even though he wasn't quite ready to return to his house, homecare was hastily arranged for him through his wife's insurance plan, thus nurses visited him several times a week for three months after that to coordinate his recovery along with his regular doctor whom he visited as needed. Lying in bed for long hours, he found that he missed all the friends that he had made up at the care facility and all the comradeship that they had provided him. Wanting to remember them he had his grown son and his wife dig out a certain trunk that he had brought back with him from the place and set it up on the giant hospital tray next to his bed without bothering to explain exactly why he wanted to do that.

In the course of time he made a pretty full recovery and could walk about the house carefully on a cane. He spent hours in a huge new easy chair in the living room with his son, watching DVDs of the old movies that they both so loved. He even got back to work only this time as a writer and poet instead of an artist and all that he produced was published. The daylight hours were normal around his house once again but sometimes, as the evening rolled on and he would lay by himself in his big orthopedic bed in his new solo bedroom with the door tightly shut, his wife and son would wonder at what went on back there. His son, being an ultra realist, chose to dismiss all this as only his father's omnipresent television set being turned on but to the old artist's wife there was something familiar about the sound of all of it. The other joyful voices there that seemed so happy and friendly as they appeared to be chatting and interacting with her ever loquacious husband reminded her of the sunnier days back up at the rest home when the old artist would be joking around with the other friendly folks in the rec room there when she would come up and visit all of them on a daily basis.

As for the old artist, for the rest of his life he never allowed the trunk full of collages to leave his bedside ever again. He made an odd request when he passed away, which was honored, they were interred with him on top of his casket when he died fifteen years later, still having never been looked at by either his wife or son as he had asked them to. Sometimes late at night people who happened to pass through the particular graveyard where he now rests swear that they hear the sound of a group of happy friends chatting and joking from within the depths of a simple crypt where the moldering bones of the old artist now spend a happy eternity in the company of some of the best friends that he had ever known.

The Artist's Rendition

Shaun Avery

Gardner was wet with sweat and dripping with rage when the telephone rang.

He stared at it for a few seconds, surprised by the sound.

Then he paced across the studio, anger turning more to curiosity with every step, and picked the receiver up.

"Hello?" he said, before adding, almost as an afterthought, "David Gardner Artist's Studio."

He had once got such a kick out of stringing those four words together but he hadn't felt that way for a while now. Hence what he had been doing when the phone rang.

Still, waiting for the person on the other end of the line to say something, he felt oddly optimistic. Though that was probably just the thrill of speaking to another person for a change. And now it was probably about to be a wrong number...

In a sudden panic that this was the case, he went to repeat his last spoken words: "David Gardner's –"

But this time, a voice cut him off by saying, "hi, Mr. Gardner?"

There was a slight accent to the voice that he couldn't quite place. It was a nice one, though. He got that much straight away.

It was a woman's too.

Soft and feminine.

"Speaking," he said. "Can I help?"

"Yes, I surely hope so," the voice replied. "I was wondering if you would be free for a little work."

He looked at the mess he'd just made of his studio and decided that anything would be better than clearing all that up.

"I certainly am," he said.

"Good," the voice replied. "Can we meet?"

They certainly could.

~~~

She picked a nice little diner on the edge of town, one in which he was used to spending large amounts of time staring into cooling cups of coffee and dreading the time when the place closed and he had to go back to his empty home.

He was worried about how he'd recognise her, having been too excited at the thought of some genuine human contact to ask her what she looked like. Luckily, though, she was the only customer inside when he arrived.

He'd been in that position a few times himself, too.

He came up behind her, greeting her by the name she'd given him.

She turned.

And smiled.

"Please," she said. "Take a seat, Mr. Gardner."

"Make it David," he replied, "and we'll have a deal."

"David." She said the word as if trying it out for size, rolling it around her tongue a little. Then raised an eyebrow. "Never Dave?"

"Rarely," he told her and took the seat that she'd offered.

The waitress knew him here – not as well as he'd have liked her to know him, but that was life – and she brought him his usual drink. Since she was used to seeing him in here alone, he could feel the curiosity radiating from her. But she hadn't indulged him by sleeping with him, so why should he indulge her by introducing the woman to this new client of his?

He waited for the waitress to leave, then took a sip of his drink and asked, "what's this business you had in mind?"

"Me."

He wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. "Excuse me?"

"Me," she repeated. "I'd like you to draw me." Her eyes met his. "You are an artist, aren't you?"

Lately he'd been starting to wonder about that, but he wasn't going to say such a thing to a stranger. Or to someone he knew, for that matter. So he just replied, "yeah, sure I am."

"Lovely," she said.

Then her eyebrow headed upwards again as she asked, "your place or mine?"

~~~

Well, it had to be hers, really, didn't it, considering the state he had left his own drawing quarters in?

Or he could have taken her back to his actual home, he supposed. But that place was just depressing. He barely spent any time there at all, instead trekking obsessively to his studio every day and night, often sleeping there, trying to call down a muse that seemed to be on permanent vacation.

He looked across at the woman, this potential new client, as they walked.

Had he bitten off more than he could chew here?

Would the drawings he did of her end up as feeble as all the others?

He didn't know.

He hoped not.

And not just for the pay.

Though he didn't know why he felt like that just yet.

They reached her house and, as they entered he asked, 'been here long?'

"Oh no," she said, taking off her handbag and placing it on a small table just inside the door. "Not very long at all."

It sort of showed, he thought.

The place didn't really look lived-in yet.

Though neither did his and he had been there months, so who was *he* to judge?

"You live alone?" he said.

But she was already through in the kitchen and did not reply.

He figured she just hadn't heard.

When he followed her through into the kitchen, he saw that she was removing her earrings and had already slid out of her shoes. Just getting comfortable, he guessed.

He hoped she didn't ask him to do the same. His socks were holey and he was pretty sure his underwear was beginning to unravel in a few places, too. A sad state of affairs, to be sure, but when no one else ever saw them, so what?

"Any particular reason you want this drawing done?" he asked.

She turned her back to him, began to wash her hands in the sink and said, "what do you know about new beginnings, Mr. Gardner?"

"David," he insisted once more.

She turned to face him again.

He watched a drop of water slide from her palm down to her bare foot as she dried her hands.

And suddenly imagined licking it off.

He tried to shake the image away.

“New beginnings,” she said. “I’m new in this town, new in this house, new... in ways you couldn’t begin to imagine.”

“Maybe I could,” he said. “I’ve got a pretty good imagination.”

He cringed even as he spoke the words.

They’d sounded a hell of a lot cooler inside his head than out of it.

They didn’t seem to bother her, though, and she came towards him, bare feet gently padding across the kitchen floor, and said, “I’d like a drawing done of the brand new me – *just* the brand new me – to celebrate this new start.”

She was within inches of him now.

The air seemingly tinged with some sort of tension to which he was unaccustomed.

He tried to think of something to say that would be more effective than his last words and could only come up with, “well, I’m your man.”

She smiled. “That’s what I hoped.”

~~~

He made a couple of preliminary, small-scale sketches on a notepad that she’d had in her bag.

Of course, a *proper* professional would have taken his full bag of tricks to the initial meeting, so he could wow the client with how wonderfully *efficient* and *reliable* he was. But Gardner hadn’t felt like a professional for a while. More a phoney with pretension.

Now, though...

How *did* he feel?

Well, the sketches weren’t bad at all, he thought, as he headed back to the studio. In fact, they were pretty good, although he couldn’t quite shake off the suspicion that he’d drawn more than he had to at her house, merely to extend the time he got to spend in the presence of another human being.

Plus she wasn’t too bad to look at.

And she had a pretty nice laugh.

He wanted to somehow capture those twin elements with her picture.  
So to the studio he went.

Standing in the doorway, looking at the chaos his rage had created, he thought about just turning back and heading home. The hour had grown late and the sun had long ago vanished, so that was what he probably should have done. But when he looked down at the sketches in his hand, he felt an emotion that had become almost alien to him recently:

Hope.

So he headed into the studio and got down to it.

~~~~~

He was back at her house a few days later.

She was posing for him.

She sat on a chair in the main room, her side to him, letting Gardner work on sketching her profile.

He was trying to concentrate solely on her but his eyes occasionally strayed to take in the house.

The place still didn't look any more lived-in.

Not that he'd seen that much of it.

Only the downstairs part.

He was trying not to dwell too much on what laid upstairs.

The bedroom.

The bed.

"Something wrong, Mr... David?"

"No," he replied, looking at her over his drawing board. "How do you mean?"

"You seem to be sweating."

"It's the heat," he said, and this was mostly the truth. "I always get hot when I'm working."

"Oh," she said.

A few seconds passed and then she added, "would you like to take your shirt off?"

And she turned her head to look at him.

"You can, you know," she told him. "I'm sure you've got nothing that I haven't seen before."

And he threw down the paintbrush and pushed the board aside and strode over to her and took her in his arms and –

“It’s, uh, it’s all right,” he replied, blushing slightly at the intensity of the fantasy he’d just envisioned.

She turned her head back. “Do you take your shirt off in your studio, David?”

He did, as it happened. Actually, sometimes he took off everything and just painted in the nude. But he didn’t want to put images like that in her mind.

Did he?

“I see what you mean about it getting hot in here,” she said. “Would you be a dear and make us both a drink of water?”

He was almost relieved to get out from behind the drawing board – one version of this woman was bad enough, but two of them, the real life woman and the illustration before him, well, that was just too much.

He headed into the kitchen and found two glasses and then stood at the sink.

She’d stood here herself just a few days ago.

Drying her hands.

Letting the water drip down her body.

He turned on the taps and looked out of the kitchen window at her garden.

And was suddenly sure he saw her standing out there.

He blinked a few times.

Looked again.

Nothing.

God help me, he thought. I’m seeing her everywhere.

As if sensing the thought, she called on him.

“David? Did you get lost in there?”

“Sorry,” he shouted back. “Coming.”

He left the kitchen, a glass in each hand.

And outside in the garden, something temporarily slipped away.

~~~

“You never answered my question,” she said, a short while later.

“Which one?”

“You never told me,” she said, “if you take your shirt off when you’re working at the studio.”

He had prepared this answer whilst making the drinks, and replied with, “sometimes I do.”

“I think I’d like to see your studio. Will you take me some time?”

“Sure,” he said. “Of course.”

“The woman in the library speaks highly of all your work, doesn’t she?”

“Is that who gave you my name and number? Mrs. Wiggins?”

She nodded.

Well, it came to something when the woman that thought the most of you was an octogenarian book lover. Still, when everyone else crossed the road to avoid you just because your hair was slightly longer than the norm and you liked to draw, he guessed it was good to have a fan.

Back in the here and now, though, his newfound muse was beginning to unbutton her blouse.

“Um... what are you doing?” he asked.

“All your talk of heat has made me feel rather prickly,” she told him. “If you’re not going to let some cool air caress your skin, I think I shall.”

And she let the blouse fall to the floor.

She still wore a bra.

He wasn’t sure if he felt relieved or disappointed about that.

~~~

Back at the studio he drew.

And drew.

It was all coming together so well now and it was hard to believe that only a week ago he had come close to giving it all up. Oh, he hadn’t seen it that way at the time – he’d told himself that his trashing of the studio, the ripping up and slashing up of various stillborn artworks was just another tantrum, like many he’d had before. Now, though, he saw there had been a dreadful finality to his actions. Before the phone had rang, he’d been well on the way to tearing this place to the ground and let’s see how the neighbours that thought he was strange felt about that.

But none of that mattered now.

Not when he had the woman to work on.

She was still a mystery to him. He didn't know where she was from, the location of birth that had given her that accent. Or when she had arrived here. Whether anyone else lived in that house with her.

Whether she was married.

He wondered about that.

It was rare to see a woman travelling alone these days. But who knew? Maybe she was a widow. Maybe she was just a loner.

These were things he suspected about her.

Not things that he knew about her.

But when he looked at his sketches, he felt he knew the woman completely.

Intimately.

Like a lover would.

He was so busy looking at the sketches that he didn't hear the studio door slide open.

Wasn't aware that he was no longer alone until he heard the familiar yet strange voice say, "ah, I see you do work in the nude."

He looked up.

Saw the woman standing in the doorway.

Saw the night and the stars poking in behind her, around her.

Then saw her sliding off her coat.

Saying, "that's okay, so do I."

She slid off her shoes, revealing naked feet. The first part of her he'd even seen bereft of clothing.

But not the last.

She was bare from top to bottom now and waiting for him.

He went to her.

~~~

Afterwards he said, "I think I'm nearly done."

"I should hope so."

"No," he said. "I mean the picture."

"Oh. Wonderful. May I see it?"

Well, she had seen everything else he had to offer, so he guessed he didn't see the harm.

He raised himself from the floor on which they'd made love and plodded over to the canvas and spun it round to face her.

She looked at it.

And began to shake.

"Baby?" he said, worried.

She was still shaking.

"Baby, what is it?"

And starting to sob.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

He came towards her.

Shaking and sobbing and now standing and screaming, she looked at him and he flinched as he saw insanity in her eyes.

"No!" she yelled. "It doesn't look like me!"

He turned back to the canvas.

"Honey, it looks just like you."

"No!" she insisted. "It doesn't!"

She ran for the door.

"It looks like her!"

And still completely naked, she ran back into the night from which she'd come.

~~~

He supposed that it was over now and, depressing a fact as that was, he guessed he'd had worse break-ups with girls.

If, indeed, that was what had happened here.

He didn't see much point in waiting by the phone – it had never rang before her, why should it after her?

There was always the option of going to her house, but he feared another reaction like the one last night.

Looked like her.

What did she mean by that?

He didn't want to dwell on what might have been, though.

So he just stayed in the studio and tried to work.

Tried.

He felt himself beginning to slide again – the colours weren't coming together, the lines wouldn't form a picture. Or, rather, they would... but only

a picture of her.

Her in the house. Her in the nude. Even her in the garden, the way he thought he'd seen her the other day.

He just couldn't lift his mind from her.

Some romantic part of him – a small part, admittedly, but one that was undeniably there – wanted to believe that this strange woman had somehow become his 'muse,' that his artistic flair was incomplete without her. But the rest of him knew that it was simpler than that. He had sensed they were kindred spirits, both sharing some sort of emptiness that infected their homes and their selves. He thought that would help them get somewhere together – and who cared that her identity was false?

Not him.

He sighed deeply and looked at a picture of some flowers that had somehow turned into a picture of her.

That was when someone knocked at the door.

~~~

Fully-clothed this time, he answered it.

And smiled.

"Hi," he said. "Why didn't you just come in, like last time?"

"Excuse me?"

Ah, so she wanted to play it cool, like last night had never happened. Well, he was fine with that.

So he replied, "nothing. Forget it. Come in."

She did so.

He closed the door behind her.

"It's good to see you," he added.

Her reply surprised him.

"Why?"

He was momentarily lost for words, unsure of what to say.

By the time he got his tongue in motion, though, she had moved away, was looking around the studio.

He sensed a certain cautiousness to her movements – she walked almost gingerly, as if afraid to touch anything. Something she certainly couldn't have been accused of last night.

She stopped at the drawing of herself and he cringed inside, fearful of another outburst.

He realised he felt different around her. Not as tongue-tied, not as ready to projectile ejaculate at any given moment. He put it down to the last time he'd seen her – running naked into the night screaming. A sight like that, he guessed, could put any man off.

She had her back to him as she looked at the picture.

He came up behind her.

“That looks just like me,” she said.

“That’s not what you said last time you saw it,” he replied and laid his hands on her shoulders.

She flinched away from him.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

He was getting used to asking that when she was about.

“No,” she said. “I just wanted to see what you’d been up to in here.”

Then she turned around and left him alone in the studio.

Again.

~~~~~

So he followed her.

He hated himself for doing so.

But he couldn’t help it.

He needed to know what was going on with this woman that had touched what passed for his life.

And not just for artistic purposes, either. Maybe at first, but not now. Things had changed since their night of shared passion. And maybe even before that. Maybe as he’d watched that single drop of water hit her foot and then wanted to lick it dry. Maybe before he’d even met her, when the woman’s phone call had prevented him from permanently destroying his workplace.

So yeah, he followed her.

He followed the woman to her home.

Where she pushed open the front door and shouted, “you!”

“That’s right,” another voice replied and Gardner gasped. Because it wasn’t another voice, not really; it was the same voice.

Both with that distinctive accent.

“How’d you find me here?” one of them said.

He was just outside of the kitchen window now, ducked down in the grass.

“How’d you think? The usual way.”

He wondered what the voice meant by that.

“Damn it, didn’t you read the note I left? I wanted to be left alone. I wanted a new beginning!”

So he guessed that the person who had just spoken was the owner of the house.

His woman.

His muse.

“But we belong together, sis,” the other voice said. “No family. No friends. No lovers. Just us.”

“I’m sick of belonging,” the reply came. “I wanted something to call my own. And for your information, you’re wrong.”

“Oh? About what?”

“About friends. See, I found one.”

“What, that artist fella?”

Gardner’s ears pricked up.

“How do you know about that?”

“I’ve been watching for a while, dear.”

The other’s voice was soothing now. Almost hypnotically so. Even out here, where Gardner was listening. So how must it have felt inside?

“Look, you ran away from our home. You got a little fed-up with having to share everything with me. I understand that. It hurts, but I understand it. But we need each other, sis. We’re halves.”

And Gardner got it.

They were twins.

That hadn’t been his muse at the studio. That was why he’d felt differently around her. It was her twin sister. Which explained why she had contradicted what her sister had said about the drawing last night. And, evidently, why his muse had got so angry: she’d thought the picture looked more like her duplicate, with whom she apparently had some issues.

This also, he realised, explained what he thought he’d seen in her garden the other day. Besotted, he’d thought he was just fantasising her vision outside, seeing the woman everywhere. But he was wrong. He must have seen the sister. Spying in at them. Jealously.

“I mean, look at you, alone in this big old house. Don’t you get lonely in it? Don’t you feel all small and alone?”

“Sometimes.” The voice was weaker now. “But I have my friend now.”

“Sure you do,” the reply came. “But he doesn’t know you as well as I do, does he?”

“That’s not fair. How can he?”

“He can’t. No one can. I know you better than you know yourself, sis.”

“Well, maybe, but... what do you want from me? Why did you come here?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

Gardner waited.

Wondering the same thing himself.

The answer came.

“I want you to come home with me.”

“But what about my home here?”

“You call this a home? Look at the place, it’s just a shell!”

“I just... haven’t got around to decorating yet.”

Even Gardner could sense the desperation to her replies now.

He wondered what had happened to the brazen, teasing beauty he has first stepped into this house with. The woman who’d asked, “your place or mine?” He just didn’t know.

“Sure you haven’t. And you never will. You could live in a hundred new houses, and they’d all just end up looking like this. Know why?”

“Why?”

“Because you know – you’ll always know – that you already have a home. With me.”

“But I...”

“But you what?”

“I said some terrible things about you on that note.”

“That I was jealous? Possessive?”

He risked a peek and saw her hang her head in shame at these words.

“You were angry,” the dominant voice said, now forgiving as well as hypnotic. “You wanted some space. But you’ve had some space now. Isn’t living with your twin sister better than all the space in the world?”

A pause.

Gardner waited.

"The bed is a little too big with just me in it," he heard his muse's voice say.

"Of course it is," the other replied. "Take more than some artist to take up my place, right?"

Which was when he could take no more.

When he burst through the door.

But it seemed the dominant sister had been expecting him.

Had known he was there, maybe known he was following all along.

And as the door slammed behind him, something big and heavy crashed over his head and sent him to the ground.

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When he awoke, he was tied to a chair.

His wrists and ankles bound.

And one of the twins was standing in front of him.

A stiff paintbrush in one hand.

A rusty saw in the other.

She had brought a canvas of her own and had stuck it to the wall before him.

"Look, sis," she said, talking to someone over his shoulder. "I can draw a much better painting of you than Mr Fancy-Pants Artist here."

Gardner looked at it.

And saw a babyish series of loops and scrawls of different colours splattered across the canvas.

"It's beautiful," a voice behind him said. "Thank you."

"Baby," he said, voice moaning, tears threatening. "What happened to you?"

It was, of course, the other twin that replied, saying, "what, you think you knew my sister? Let me tell you something – all you knew was an act."

"That's right," the woman behind him said. "The name you knew me by, that was the name of me as an individual. But I'm not an individual."

And she grinned at her sister.

"I'm a twin."

"Exactly," the other said. "And I've come to make us whole again. To take you back where you belong."

Gardner let the sobs come now.

He had fallen for someone that had never really existed.

There was no compassion on the other twin's face as she said, "Sis, go wait outside."

She obeyed.

Gardner watched.

Her feet were bare again.

Just like that very first day he'd met her.

But he'd never met her, had he?

Not the real her, at least.

And now the other sister was coming towards him.

Dropping the paintbrush.

Swinging the saw.

"I'll handle the drawing of my sister, mister," she said. "I'll soothe her in the night and drink coffee with her. But just in case you get any ideas about drawing her again with these big hands of yours..."

She crouched down behind him.

Laid the saw against his wrists.

"Or you ever decide to touch yourself, thinking about the parts of my sister that you never should have seen..."

The thought drove her to righteous and vengeful fury as she began to saw.



## Why?

*Michelle Worthington*

Your hand upon my shoulder  
Your breath upon my neck  
The smell of booze is all around  
I know what happens next

You brace your hands against me  
You push with all your might  
My hands come out to break my fall  
My body's now in flight

I hit the floor  
The pain's intense  
I want to cry  
But that won't help

You grab my hair  
Yank back my head  
The look in your eyes  
I've come to dread

You raise your hand  
I close my eyes  
I feel the sting  
It's no surprise

And then your fist  
Slams in my ribs  
A cry of pain  
Escapes my lips

I try to move  
You push me down  
You kick my head

I start to drown

I feel your blows  
But I can't move  
I'm in and out  
Of consciousness

I feel the tears  
Flow down my face  
I beg you, please stop  
But get no response

Time stretches out  
Why won't it fly  
I want this over  
I want to die

And then you stop  
Stand up and leave  
The door slams shut  
I heave a sigh of relief.

## **Neither Locks Nor Doors**

*Ken L. Jones*

Jimmy O'Toole had never intended to become a burglar but sometimes life just works out like that. Actually what he had planned to become was a famous escape artist like his idol, Harry Houdini. To that end he had spent every waking moment of his young childhood and early adult years perfecting the skills that would make such a career possible. Little did he realize that all of this was in vain because he grew up in a time when such talents were no longer in favor or much desired as any kind of a lucrative way of earning a living. By the time he was an adult, television and night clubs rarely featured or favored such forms of show business and so he found himself not only not being able to do what he had planned with his life but more so vastly uninterested in doing any other kind of work either. Perhaps he might have become a locksmith but something about that seemed much too mundane and tawdry an application of the skills and flamboyance that he had cultivated. He fell into his true life's calling quite by accident. A neighbor had locked her keys inside of her house absentmindedly and had come and asked him if he might be able to gain entry for her, using his magician skills. Since he still always carried lock picks on his person at all times, he easily opened the simple front door for his grateful neighbor. An offhand comment from her planted a devious and unthought-of seed in his mind.

"Thank heaven that you're honest! Why, you could rob a person blind with your ability with locks and they couldn't do much about it."

Once the idea was planted in his fertile and unsettled brain, Jimmy had to agree and so he fell into pulling an exploratory and tentative first heist. Perhaps if it hadn't all gone so easy he would have never done it again but it did. The main haul consisted of a rare antique coin collection that was easily fenced and the payday from it helped his widowed mother catch up on some bills that she was severely behind on. This finally set his feet firmly on the path. The life of crime he created for himself over the next few years was both gentlemanly and not unlike being in the show business world that he had once dreamt of. He saw himself as a kind of Robin Hood who never took anything from anyone who really couldn't afford it. He especially prided himself in the fact that he never carried a

weapon and went out of his way to make sure that no one was home to raise a fuss when he pulled his meticulous and well thought out capers.

The years skipped by like a smooth stone skimming the surface of a pond and Jimmy had to admit that he was pretty happy with the lifestyle he had stumbled into. After his mother passed away he was very active in supporting local charities and needy cases and on top of that still led a very refined life.

Everything was going fine until the Wentworth caper went south on him. After careful research of the premises had revealed that she had two very expensive and desirable paintings by the much sought after Modigliani, he decided that he was going to boost the place. Cleverly dating old lady Wentworth's good-looking maid for a couple of weeks he was able to easily garner all the intel that he needed to make this happen. According to Regina, the maid, Mrs. Wentworth was going to shut the whole house down and leave it unattended except for Regina's presence for over two months while she did the Easter season at her other mansion in Palm Beach, Florida. Jimmy was particularly excited about accomplishing all this because his most reliable fence had a very well-to-do collector who was willing to cough serious money in order to have these two particular paintings all to himself. If everything went according to Hoyle, Jimmy figured that this job alone would net him enough money so he could live in the style to which he had become accustomed for the next six months or so before he would have to get his hands dirty again, pulling a new heist. The main linchpin of all of this revolved around him tricking Regina out of the house for a couple of hours late at night. This he planned to accomplish by inviting her on her birthday out to dinner at the fanciest restaurant which happened to be out at the very far end of town and then showing up there late. This he knew she would do because even though the Wentworth home would be unattended in her absence, it contained the world's most expensive and state of the art alarm system.

The night he planned to do all this started out with so many ill-omens that he practically aborted the whole thing several times. Never had he robbed a house in such a heavy rainstorm before. Never had he had a flat tire on the way to such a job and never had he seen so many policemen doing whatever the hell they were doing that night when he had been out and about earning his living. Indeed, something about all this made his very teeth ache and his stomach twitch but still he pressed on. The alarm system

was easily disabled if one knew where it was and what kind it was, which he surely did thanks to the ever gabby and gossiping Regina. Within five minutes of accomplishing that he had easily undone the antique front door and let himself into the house. All was dark as he expected it to be and he crept like a cat to where he was headed guided by the thin beam of a very large Kel-lite that he always carried with him on such jobs. He knew exactly where in the library the two particular paintings he was after were and five minutes after he found them they were off the wall and wrapped in plastic to prevent them from being recognized or damaged by the torrential rain.

Then, as he began to exit the house, to his horror he heard two female voices coming from the top floor, one which he had never heard before and one which he well recognized by its distinctive inflection as belonging to Regina. Perhaps it was the fact that nothing like this had ever happened to him before during a job that accounted for how amateurishly he attempted to exit the building. He was red with rage, wondering what was going on. What in the world was old lady Wentworth still doing here and why if Regina wasn't joining him for dinner, why hadn't she called up and canceled their date? Before he had too much more time to ruminate on all this he suddenly found his path blocked by the irate Regina. She was holding a huge baseball bat in her hands and was rearing back with it. Realizing what Jimmy was doing and how he had used her unhinged her and she was swinging the bat at him, violently trying to knock his head off while calling him every filthy name in the book. She backed him into a corner and he had no choice but to finally defend himself. Even after all this he still felt a great deal of affection for the spunky good-looking maid and so he tried not to do much more than get her out of his way so that he might flee. After several tentative swings with his metal flashlight did not deter her he had no choice but to swing a little bit harder. One of arcs of that caught her square on her pert nose and drove the bone within it deep into her brain, killing her instantly. Horrified, he fled, slipping and sliding in the spurting blood that this act had released on the ground in front of him. Wildly throwing open the front door he scrambled across the slick cement of the front porch and then lost his balance due to the combination of the rain water there and poor Regina's red dark blood. The last thing he saw before he lost consciousness was a giant potted plant that he fell into, knocking himself unconscious in the process.

A time without counting later he came to and was surprised as he painfully arose to his feet to see that he was still on what he at first thought was the Wentworth's front porch but as he looked at it there was something very different about it. It was cramped and tiny and nothing much more than a tightly enclosed space with a door in it. It was the most claustrophobic thing that he had ever experienced and so, even though he really didn't want to go back into the house, he decided he had no choice. He tried to let himself in the conventional way but found that the door was locked. Freaking out from how enclosed he was, he reached into his pocket, brought out his lock picks and let them work their magic. What greeted his eyes next made him doubt his very senses for what he saw before him was not the inside of the Wentworth place but was instead another similar tight space whose only defining characteristic was a similar locked door.

Having little choice in the matter he again used his talents to open this door too and was flabbergasted to find yet another enclosed space with yet a different door in it. After working his way through twenty or thirty more such setups he paused for a moment and then realized that something was behind him in the dark and it was after him and meant him great harm. Not knowing exactly what it was that pursued him added an even thicker layer of terror to the franticness of how fast he let him through the next following doors. After going through perhaps a thousand of them his mind began to crack from the guilt and irony of all this and, unbidden, a saying his old Irish mother was fond of, "When one door closes another one opens" began echoing through his mind. He laughed out loud at the truth of it as he realized that he would now furiously be opening doors for the rest of eternity.

## Fury

*Tim Wilkinson*

I vividly remember the evening my wife, Chey, first told me that she was sleeping with Rusty, my best friend. I had just returned from work. My calico cat met me at the door, as was her way.

My wife stood in the kitchen, quite sullen, busily preparing a meal, as was her way as well. No sign of sadness, guilt or shame tainted her clear, unburdened eyes as she stood before me, simply stating the facts, heartless and shallow. Her face betrayed no emotion. No fear or hesitation tainted her voice; the words fell easily from her softly pursed lips. As I listened, it felt as if she were doing no more than reading me her shopping list or detailing the mundane, repetitive activities of her day or week. Her attitude was one of indifference, cold and aloof, with no evidence of self-reproach, regret or embarrassment clouding her speech. Her deep, East Asian accent only added to the smug, hollow sound of her biting words.

“You know I’m doing Rusty, don’t you?”

I said nothing.

“Well I am. We’ve been... doing it for about a year now and whether you’re willing to admit it or not, you know we are. So I just wanted to get it out in the open. We both know you can’t please me, you never have. I see no point in either of us denying it and, well, Wayne... Rusty does. He does things to me... things you cannot and never will. I think you know what I mean. However, I want you to know that there is no reason for anything to change. I do want you to believe that. I’m not leaving you and we... well Rusty and I, we will continue being discrete. You needn’t see it, no sense in that. Don’t you agree? I mean you haven’t yet and we’ve been fucking pretty much every chance we’ve had this last year, so I suspect that won’t change.”

“What about your daughter?” I asked, stupefied and speechless, looking down at the hungry cat circling in and out, around and between my shins, eagerly pursuing her evening treats.

“Like I said, Wayne, there’s no need for things to change. You’re her stepfather and you always will be.” She turned back to the steaming wok on the stove, tossing in a few more freshly cut veggies and a dash of salt, her

speech now ended. “Anyway... have you had dinner yet, hungry? You’re going to the show tonight, right?”

Of course I was shocked, stunned and then again not. In truth, I saw it coming. I am not nearly so blind. I knew exactly what was happening around me, in front of me, in my own home. The furtive glances, the sly winks and the tender, lurid stares had not escaped my notice. Nor was I blind to the suppressed, knowing smirks, the close passing of hesitant, lingering bodies, the slight, brushing touches. No, I caught the fleeting, secretive smiles, the way her eyes seemed to twinkle at his presence, the lightly bitten lips, the nervous pacing and the ever-present anxiousness they both seemed to share for my early, quickened departure.

Turning away from her, fearing she may catch sight of my pain or the seething, murderous furies seeping into my soul, I stepped away, not wanting to accord her that one pleasure. I took out a small tin of cat food, opened it and spooned a portion into a small white china saucer. This was my twice-daily chore, as my wife had never warmed to the animal and would have preferred to let her starve, had she a choice, a sentiment I sensed as mutual. Moreover, I have learned it best to keep her well fed. Otherwise she tends to bring things home, things with the head chewed off. And well... there are some things even I would rather not see. Kneeling beside her on the floor, I softly patted the silken fur of her head, quieting my thoughts and emotions as she purred in contented delight.

Then I left the kitchen without further words, hurrying up the stairs to shower and change. When finished, I quietly left, driving the short distance to the center of town for my biweekly night at the local theatre. The play that evening was a classic tale, one of legends and the Gods of old. It drew from me so many memories of my distant youth, memories both happy and forlorn. I left the theatre feeling much better than when I had arrived, resolved and accepting, now determined to see this through.

When I got back I found Rusty settled comfortably on a stool, my wife Chey, seated close beside him. He seemed well pleased, serene and at ease, yet perhaps a bit weary or fatigued. She sat brushing sleek, black hair, which was shimmering with wetness. Her thin burnished lips, oddly free of lipstick, seemed a bit blushed and worn. Of course, I knew what all this meant. Seems my timing was perfect.

“Hey bud,” Rusty began. “How was the show?”

“Not bad. I’ve been to worse.”



“So what was the play about, more Shakespeare?”

“No... actually, tonight it was a Greek... comedy.”

“You two boys can talk,” Chey interjected. “I’m worn out,” she added, casting a smile towards Rusty as if I weren’t there. “I’m going to bed. Good night, Wayne.” She placed a light, thoughtless kiss against my cheek. Despite the evidence of her recent shower, she smelt of wine, sex and condom lubricant. “Don’t stay up too late. You have to get my car to the repair shop before noon, remember?” With that she turned, walking slowly up the stairs, moving as if each step drained her nearly spent well of vitality and vigor. She turned round once. “Rusty... guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Oh,” replied Rusty, looking at me oddly, his smile weak, uncertain. “Yes, yes of course, I suppose you will, sometime.”

I heard the bedroom door close and felt Rusty’s hand settle across my forearm. “She tells me you two had a talk. I’m glad, Wayne. I hated continuing, you know, as we were.”

“Yes, I can see how much you hate it,” I replied, noting the pink bite marks rising on one side of his neck.

“Well, give it time, Wayne. I know it’s fresh and raw now. But hell, bud, you knew it anyway, didn’t you?” before I had time to answer, he continued. “I’m doing you a favor really, both of you. I don’t want you two to split up and if I can help, well why would I refuse that? And we must think of your daughter, right? I mean she doesn’t need another breakup, another move, a new man in her life, all of that. I’m sure you agree. No, the best thing for her, for all of you is if things stay just as they are. Don’t you think? You know I care for Chey... and you, right? And Wayne... you must know, and believe me on this, I would never take Chey away from you. You know that, right? I’ve told her the same. What kind of friend would that make me, I ask?”

“Yes, indeed, what kind of friend,” I answered, noting his half-open fly and the balled up wad of tainted tissue lying atop the counter.

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She was correct in one thing, nothing need change and nothing did. She and Rusty continued screwing once or twice a day, sometimes settling for a quick hand job on the sofa or a hurried blowjob in the kitchen, most often while I showered or slept.

But one thing did change, for me anyway, for ever since the night she came clean, something snapped and deep within me something sprouted or hatched, something new born and it grew. Soon it matured, becoming a thing hard and cold, malevolent and full of spite. Yes, one might call it rage or perhaps simply label it a deep and mounting desire for vengeance, retribution, justice. One might even call it hatred, yet whatever name one chose, it soon colored my sight and guided my heart as well as my actions.

Why, you might ask did I not act then, to what cause could I possibly attribute my hesitation or ambivalence? To which I can only answer by telling you of my soft heart, my hatred of violence and my concern for my daughter and of course Chey's eternal, unbound beauty. Yes, she was indeed an angel in shape and form, a delicate, delicious temptation, one both Rusty and I found irresistible, alluring and addictive. Yet I could not continue, not as we were, what man could?

I know she was, is, my wife and I did love her, once I think, who can truly say? I have loved so many women in my day, in my years and my years have been plentiful. And certainly, Rusty had been my closest companion, my best and often my only friend, of course, now I now know why. Yet as you may imagine, after that night, they both changed in my eyes.

As for sex, well, when one has lived as long as I have, sex finds its rightful place, no longer is it the most important thing in life, yet pleasing one's woman if anything, only grows in importance and stature. With Chey, what is the point in going the extra mile, to please one such as her? I have known a hundred women like her and sadly, the more one gives, the more they want.

Actually I am capable of things no mortal can imagine and in bed... I leave that to your imagination, as the events of the next few days did show and prove. Yet my many special, even magical talents; would have done nothing to win her love, only feed her unending greed and her endless lust for more, so I simply lived and loved as a human, quickly growing bored with her selfish, childlike lovemaking. For making love is a thing one gives, not a thing one takes. To Chey it was but another pleasure to gain, a joy to hoard and a sweet to consume and like money or jewels, the more she had, the more she wanted.

I suppose it is somewhat of a shame, though, as the things I could have done to her, for her, the pleasures I could have given her, the magic I

could have worked, if only she had loved me. On the other hand, one like me must also be careful of such things, it never pays to show too much to the humans we share our lives with, for they often find such things fearful and grotesque and, let's face it, they all eventually grow old, age and die, while I go on. Yes, as I've said, my years have been many. My lovers number in the hundreds, for I have stood within the walls of Troy and I have seen them burn.

Once they called me Fury, but Chey and her boy, they did call me... vengeance. They did feel my furies.

As for Chey and I, she continued sleeping with me, sleeping mostly and when she did see fit to grace me with her body, I knew, indeed, nothing had changed. She simply lay there as before; limp and bored, eyes closed, lips silent and tightly pursed, making little or no sounds, exhibiting no movement, displaying no emotions, emitting no sighs.

I too did as always, struggling to maintain my interest just long enough to cross the finish line, which I most often found difficult, sometimes impossible. Now don't get me wrong, Chey is, was human, more or less and there were the odd, occasional moments when she would actually open her eyes and make some slight sound or movement suggestive of pleasure or desire. Everything was just as it had always been and seemed most certain to stay that way.

And I did, I really did. I did give it time. I gave it a week, a month and then two, then three, then I could give it no more. Even an immortal has his limits.

It was a Saturday, just before Rusty arrived. Chey stood in front of the fridge, wearing her full length, silken red robe, with nothing underneath but candy.

"I'm going to divorce you," I told her, eager for any reaction. To my surprise, this actually caused her to turn and look at me.

"Divorce, but why?"

"I think you know why"

"No, you can't mean this," she said smiling, turning away as she didn't care, yet I knew better.

"Yes I can and I do."

"Really," she answered, feigning boredom, as she paused, testing, her concern growing.

I saw the thoughts turning in her brain, perhaps I meant it.

“What of your daughter?”

“Your daughter? Well, she can choose for herself, she’s sixteen now.”

“But I thought you understood.”

“Oh but I do. I understand perfectly, my dear. It is you who seem confused. By the way, I’m no lawyer of course, but if I were you, I’d get some legal advice. We have only been married two years now and I think you will lose your legal immigrant status when our divorce is granted and it will be. I do hope your mother still has room in that tiny, shitty old apartment of hers, or maybe your sister can make room. At any rate, I am sure you won’t find it too difficult... falling back into your old routine... and your old job. One never forgets how to be whore, does one? What city is she living in now, your mother I mean, Chenzdu, Schengen? I’m sorry, I never can remember those Chinese names.”

She grew fearful, stammering. I had touched a nerve. Her greatest fear, the thing she dreaded the most, returning to the life she once knew now loomed before her, possible, impending, fresh and real, firm and harsh as Rusty’s ten inch cock.

“No... no, Wayne, you wouldn’t do that, would you, not really? You love me, right?”

I said nothing for a moment, then added. “Chey, I don’t think I ever even liked you. Be out by dusk.”

“No...! No Please...”

She dropped her robe on the floor and smiled. Her small, perky, yet ample breasts gleaming softly in the harsh white light from the open fridge, the darker flesh of her perfectly shaped nipples standing tall and firm. They were gorgeous, just like the rest of her, perfect, sexy, alluring. I must say, I have always admired her breasts, truly her best feature. And I will admit, I may not be human, but I am male and as I let my eyes fall to the small patch of velveteen blackness between her smooth, milk white thighs, I felt a twinge of regret, a surge of lust and desire as a glow of warmth and need rose in my gut.

“Are you sure, Wayne? Isn’t there any other way?”

“Yes Chey, there is always another way... But you won’t like it.”

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The next morning I met Rusty at the door, letting him in as I usually did before leaving for work. As he stood at the base of the stairs, nervously looking up to the landing above us, while uneasily checking his watch, impatient for my departure, I thrust the barrel of the gun into his stupid, gaping mouth.

“I could kill you now! You know that, scumbag!” I screeched, my anger and wrath seething and hot, my spittle spraying across his face and wide, white eyes. God, how I wanted to pull the trigger and laugh as his brains splattered across the walls and door behind him. I am not the least bit ashamed to admit that it took all of my strength to hold my finger steady and not to twitch, fidget or spaz.

I am no killer, I never was, not even when I was young and ruled the inland seas. No, although I have accompanied a million men to their deaths, they died of their own accord, not by the work of my hands. They died of greed and arrogance, their own lust for power, wealth and domination. This would be no different, for as before, I had better things in mind.

“Yes, you wife humping piece of trash, I could kill you now. Tell me why I shouldn’t!”

Rusty pissed himself, whimpering incoherently as I crammed the barrel deeper and deeper into his throat, forcing his cunt licking tongue down while pushing him back against the door. Cold steel filled his tit sucking mouth as he retched and gagged. He struggled vainly, reaching out with both his fondling, exploring hands, grasping for the gun as my knee slammed into his easily tightened balls. I struck, bringing the steel barrel down across the back of his head and neck as he bent, his gut churning, retching pain and filth from the crushing blow of my knee as I struck him again and again, until he crumpled motionless to the floor.

When he awoke, I loomed large above him, a giant, a monster, he nothing more than a mouse, an insect, something to be crushed and ground underfoot. He stood no more than three inches high, naked and bare, while I, a mere six foot one, towered above him, as in the days of old, an Olympian God.

I laughed and giggled as he ran, stumbled and fell. He dashed about the room, his cries and whelps like that of frightened adolescent girl. He hid behind an empty shoe, behind the wastebasket, underneath the furniture, cried and begged, all to no avail, for my fury was full, my rage that of a mad bull. Oh, the fun I did have, kicking and tossing him about like a

hungry playful cat. I sent him running, only to jump before him, my feet slamming hard against the floor, knocking him from his feet and ending his flight. I stomped my feet about him, as if to crush him, squish him into a red, mushy ick, yet each time, somehow, I missed.

He soon tired; exhaustion and terror getting the better of him as I too lost interest, growing easily bored and tired of the silly games. Oh, I played and played, laughing as his tiny, feeble screams, like the squeaking of a frightened rodent, filled my ears and tickled my lightened soul, yet for all the glee satisfaction I found in our little games, I took little pleasure from it all. No, what I sought was justice and justice, like vengeance, is a thing best served by another's hands.

So I brought an end to it all yet not before, when pulling him out from underneath the washing machine where he had pinned himself in a last futile and desperate flight, I injured one leg, snapping it below the knee as if it were an over cooked chicken bone. I must confess, I howled at his pain, rolling with unexpected and jubilant laughter.

Grasping him by his broken leg, ignoring the agony he must have felt, I raised him to my face for one last jab. I smiled and said simply, "Yummy," before dangling him over my open mouth, machinating loudly, gnashing my teeth as if ready to mash and devour him. Then I tossed him into an open shoebox to join his cold and naked mistress, placing the lid firmly on top.

No, I am not a killer. I could never do that, not to anyone, especially to my own wife and my once, best friend.

The next morning, standing in front of the small bathroom window, looking out and into the back yard, I noticed the shoebox, sitting alone in the center of the yard, the lid lying beside it in the graying, uncut grass.

I did not let the cat in until the next morning, for as I've said before, she has a habit of bringing things home when I do not feed her, things with the head chewed off, and well... there are some things, even I would rather not see.

## **The Darlingtons at Dinner**

***Ken Goldman***

A happy family, that's what the four Darlingtons were. To watch Mr. William Darlington and his clan enjoying dinner table conversation was to observe a small slice of Americana as it used to be and as so many less fortunate parents unquestionably wished it still was.

"Excellent pot roast, honey," Darlington told Betsy.

"These days a woman has to know how to stretch a buck," his wife answered. "But don't complain about leftovers tomorrow, okay?"

Everyone laughed.

"So, how did school go today?" Mr. Darlington asked Sarah, his youngest, who recently had entered 10th grade. "Did you ace that American History exam?"

"I did fine, Dad. And I tried out for the cheerleading squad. I think I've got a good shot."

"Pass me a roll, would you?" George asked his little sister. "And Ashley Carmichael's phone number, if you have it. She's on the squad." Flashing a toothy grin, the teen cupped both hands before his chest to indicate his reason for this particular interest in the Carmichael girl.

From her stove, Betsy Darlington smiled at her son's robust hormonal health, even when a parental reprimand seemed in order.

"George, you ought to show some courtesy towards those girls. They work hard, you know. Hard work at anything deserves one's respect. Who wants more potatoes?"

"Sorry, Mom. I didn't mean any disrespect. But I wouldn't mind having Ashley's phone number. Okay, Sarah?"

"Here's your roll," his sister answered. "I'll think about the phone number."

The parents exchanged grins.

"And how was your day, George?" William asked his son.

"Oh, you know, Dad. Same old, same old. Mr. Harmon - our English teacher - he cut this gi-normous fart right in the middle of his grammar lecture. You should have seen everyone trying hard not to laugh. But old Harmon, he just went on babbling about the present-perfect tense as if nothing had happened. Then he asked for an example of the present perfect

and Harvey Gold raised his hand and said 'Mr. Harmon has just farted.' The class fell on the floor."

Kids. Darlington had to smile at that one. "Education is important, son. Some people lose sight of that, but don't you ever forget it."

Betsy smiled too, although the woman recognized when to change the subject. She dished out thick scoops of mashed potatoes. Taking her seat at the table, she turned serious, even with Suzie, the family's terrier, sniffing for scraps at her feet.

"You know what tomorrow is, don't you?"

"Awww, Mom..." from George.

"We're counting on you," she said. "On both of you. We have to do the right thing, all of us. I'm sure if your Grandmother were here she would be counting on you too." Breast cancer had taken the old woman, whose late husband's health plan proved a day late and a dollar short.

"Blue Cross," William muttered. "More like Blue Double Cross."

Suzie tried her luck at George's feet. The boy managed to secretly slip the terrier a chunk of his pot roast. His father noticed the boy's deed but pretended not to. Putting down his fork, he turned serious too.

"Your mother is right, son. Sometimes doing the right thing isn't the easiest. But we each have to do our part, all of us, together. Agreed?"

Brother and sister turned to each other. Sarah nodded her approval toward her brother.

"Okay, Dad," George said. "Sure. The right thing. Agreed."

"I guess I can miss a day at school," Sarah chimed in. "I sure don't mind missing Mrs. Stinson's Biology exam."

Nods of agreement from the parents.

"You know the drill," William Darlington added. "We've only got one shot at this." He indicated the pile of small firearms in the corner of the dining room. "Well, maybe four shots."

"Okay, okay," Betsy Darlington interrupted. "Enough of this talk about killing the President. Who wants more pot roast...?"



## Neglected Prodigy

*Ron Koppelberger*

The maneuver was an unadorned rite of harmless absolution as he pounded against the locked metal door. He was beneath the reverberating inspiration of intense disagreement, a moment of weakness for he wanted the garden and the rite that was due him. The truth was that the measure of wisdom in blunders of rambling sanatorium guard were calculated to route one's spirit and estimated sense of balance, an attempt to kill the soul and the wonder of curiosity, at the world the very thing that makes life worth living. The brotherhood of construed illusion and bare fact were notions for the doctors and technicians. He simply presented the earnest indicator of their error in the way he hung his head sullenly wanting the passion of the garden. He depended upon the social interaction that would come at 2:30 P.M., the free will of rapture and the wish to be with others of his nature, his kind and he wondered for a moment, what was his kind. Locked behind steel doors and kept secure, secret wishing in desire and need; he wanted the definable concord with kindred spirits, the commingling of essence in fervid whispers. He was in mortal commune behind locked doors, in prison so to speak with the essence of want, want for freedom.

At 2:30 his hope was in collapse. He was still in his padded cell awaiting the stream of group therapy, the interaction the garden and the others offered. In worship he paraded for the janitorial custodian, strutting and grunting in hopeful murmurings; he would perform for the nurse that would lead him to the garden and the others, a chance at fresh air and the freedom of sunshine. Where was the guard? It was 2:30... still waiting, he thought, waiting for the essence of life. The rare wine awaited him, the restoration of soul and spirit, the resolution to alien touch and primal resilience, the key to salvation and the love of peace, peace of mind in primal want.

Finally, at 3:00 P.M. the nurse arrived. He opened the door and led the gorilla to the garden, in proffered apology he handed a banana to him as a peace offering.

He loved the bright yellow fruit and the company of the garden for it was so different from the locked doors of his prison.

## **Behavioral Problem**

*Kevin L. Jones*

Mrs. Ellis could not believe the change in Billy's demeanor of late. The sweet little boy had gone from being one of her favorite students to being the terror of the schoolyard. In the last week he had gotten into three fights, been tardy twice and yesterday when he had been called upon to answer a question in class he had told her to go to hell. All this acting out she might have been able to ignore but she could not overlook the cigarette burns that Billy had shown up with today on his arm. Everything about this dreadful situation made her want to contact social services but she knew Billy's mother quite well and did not believe her to be capable of such things. Today after school she would visit Billy's home to find out what exactly was going on. If she did not receive satisfactory answers from Billy's parents she would then go to the authorities.

When she pulled up in front of the boy's home she could see Billy sitting on the front porch. His eyes were downcast as he pushed the small toy car back and forth. When Mrs. Ellis approached him he turned and went into his home without saying a word. She walked up to the front door which stood ajar and knocked. No one answered. Nothing stirred in the darkened home. She knocked again and this time called out but still got no reply. As she went ahead and entered the house her nostrils were assaulted by the vilest reek that she had ever had the displeasure of smelling. The horrid odor seemed to be emanating from the den. Mrs. Ellis clasped her hand over her nose and went towards the stench. She let out a quiet whimper when she reached it.

Billy and his mother's corpses sat on the couch there side by side, their bodies so black and bloated that she could hardly recognize them. Billy's father lay at their feet face down in a pool of dried blood. He was dead from a self-inflicted gunshot. All three looked as if they had been deceased for days.

As Mrs. Ellis struggled to comprehend how this could possibly be she began to hear something stirring in the kitchen. In a daze she stumbled towards the sound but when she reached the front of the house she found herself quite alone. She seemed to be the only thing still living in the home. Then she felt it, a horrid sensation like ice cold breath on the back on her

neck. She could sense someone standing behind her. She slowly turned and came face to face with Billy's father. The top of his head was blown out, blood oozed from the dreadful apparition's gaping mouth. His skin was horribly bloated and had begun to turn black. Mrs. Ellis tried to step backwards but the specter's hand lashed out and wrapped around her throat.

The phantom spat blood in her face as it croaked, "D'you think I'd let you leave me, bitch? I'll never let you take my son from me. I'll see us all dead first."

As Mrs. Ellis's vision began to grow dark she wondered if she too would show up for class much changed as Billy had. It would indeed be interesting to see what the morning brought.

## Revenge

*Neil Leckman*

Tim was sitting in the living room watching TV. He flipped the switch to the speaker in the room twenty feet below him, soundproof and secure. The howling was still going on, although it was quieter than it had been earlier. Janet must be weakening, after all she had been howling nonstop now for 18 hours. It had proven to be a most interesting experiment and it allowed Tim to get revenge on the two women who had contrived to ruin his life. He almost felt sorry for her, but not quite. Six months ago the two women had been instrumental in getting him fired from his position at one of the local hospitals. Both had filed sexual harassment charges against him and followed that up with a civil lawsuit for something he'd never done. Fired and under investigation, his prospects of employment dwindled to nothing like so much smoke on a summer breeze...

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Janet and Deb had worked hand in hand to get the charges against him filed and ensured that their stories matched. Lewd comments and groping had been the charges and with a lack of any credible witnesses, other than the two of them, he had been fired and fired. That was when he began construction of his subterranean room twenty feet below his basement. It hadn't been easy, but lacking any chance of employment he had plenty of time to devote to it. Once the eight by eight concrete room was finished he'd gone out to capture Janet. It wasn't hard because she had a habit of staying after all the other employees left for the day. The primary reason was so she could go through their desks looking for reasons to terminate them, something she enjoyed doing more than anything else in life. She had been the butt of jokes during her childhood because she had matured years before other girls and dressed in tattered clothes, always with a lingering scent of body odor. Hatred of everyone successful smoldered in her. Tim liked to call her the bitch's bitch, because she hurt people for no other reason than to see the pain of their faces which always brought a smile to hers. As she left the office building to go to her car, Tim, hidden in the shadows by the dumpster, stepped out behind her and clamped a chloroform

soaked cloth over her mouth. When she fell to the ground she pinned him, knocking the wind out of him. He clawed his way free, grabbed her foot, dragged her over to his hatch back and managed to get her inside. Once that was done he bound her hands and feet and gagged her. He took special joy in gagging her and in fact wrapped duct tape several times around her head just for fun. Getting her home and down into the cell wasn't a problem.

Now he just had to get Deb for his plan to work.

Deb was the opposite of Janet when it came to work; she showed up several hours earlier than anyone else and used the time to go through their desks. Janet and Deb were both nasty creatures of habit and that was what Tim counted on to make his plan work. He jimmied the loading dock door and hid in the janitor's closet near Deb's office. When he heard her unlocking her office door he snuck out and subdued her. Unlike Janet, Deb was small and skinny so there was no risk of getting pinned under her. Once he had her bound and gagged, he took her home too. Before he took her down to the cell, as he liked to call it, he gassed Janet with chloroform through the vents in the ceiling. He dragged Deb into the room, removed the ropes and duct tape and handcuffed her to Janet. They worked so well together against him it seemed only fair. Now that he had them both he would begin the experiment.

Police came to his house when both women were reported missing, since he was the obvious suspect, but found no evidence against him. They kept him under surveillance but there wasn't a lot to see. Down in the hidden room the women cried and yelled, beating their fists against the heavy metal door. Tim began playing heavy metal music extremely loud all day long and denied the two women any food. He took pleasure in venting the smell of cooking whenever he ate a meal through the overhead vent. He wanted to see how long it would take before one of them consumed the other, much like they had consumed the dreams and lives of so many people.

For two days nothing happened, which disappointed him, so he gassed them and snuck in. He lathered both women with steak sauce and herbs from head to toe, including the clothes they wore. That didn't go as planned when they ate their clothes instead of each other. It wasn't long before all that was left was the two of them naked to the world. The room began to smell horrible since Tim only placed a couple of coffee cans inside to use as toilets and he had no intention of emptying them anytime soon. It

was amazing how long the two women held out, seven days and they still hadn't done anything to each other. The police came again and asked to look around the house. Tim told them to feel free, since there was no way they'd find the hidden trap door that led down to the secret cell.

On the ninth day Janet snapped. Both women were slumped against the walls of the room, exhausted from lack of food and the constant loud music that denied them sleep. Noticing that Deb appeared to have fallen into a light doze, she snuck over next to her. Just as she opened her eyes Janet grabbed both sides of her head and beat it repeatedly into the concrete wall. Deb screamed in agony and clawed at Janet, leaving deep gouges only her arms, the blood trickling down and dripping in Deb's eyes. There was a loud crunch and Deb went limp. Janet continued to slam her head into the wall until there were clumps of bone and hair stuck on the brick. Blood and brains were smeared on her hands when she pulled them away and realizing what she'd just done, she screamed up at the speaker overhead. She crawled away from Deb and slumped against the wall. Later when she woke she cried and beat her fists against the floor. She put one fist in her mouth and bit on it to keep from screaming. Sanity had crept out the door for Janet and left a wild-eyed beast in her place. Tasting the blood and brains on her hand, she looked over at Deb's cooling corpse and gagged. Then after an hour she moved next to the body and stuck a finger into the brains that hung from the fractured skull. Unable to resist the temptation, she began to eat with vigor, slurping the blood and brains down so quickly she choked.

Later that night Tim snuck down and left her a bottle of water laced with LSD. Later he sat upstairs and listened to Janet howling and beating her head against the wall until she lost consciousness. When Tim walked into the room she was sitting in one corner, feces smeared all over her and the walls and a thin line of drool dripping from her chin. Gassing her one last time, he bound her and dragged her to his car. Then he went down and bagged the remains of Deb's partially eaten corpse and took it to the car as well. He drove to a wooded area near Janet's office and unloaded both women.

Satisfied with his work, he drove home where he celebrated his victory by drinking a bottle of bleach.

Pain Painted Red

Patricia Anabel

Here again
Comes the pain
On the bathroom floor
Behind the locked door

My eyes I tightly squeeze
Fighting back my tears
To choke my sobs I try
You mustn't see me cry

I reach for the blade
Sadness, a crimson shade
My blood flows freely
A release I am feeling

Red river trickles down my arm
Myself only I can harm
Blood flow changes into dripping
Into the darkness I am slipping...

Shut In

Matthew Wilson

Since the bombs had flattened the great city, Mother said Ben must never leave the house.

The biohazard suit did not fit him and the poisoned air would rot his lungs similar to the skyscrapers weathered down like gritted teeth. Sometimes they'd play games and read books. But since the world ended there'd been no TV or radio so she'd thrown them out to save space.

Ben was a good boy as he helped her round the house, but he'd reached the curious age. He wished for friends, to see the world and Mother mourned he had been born too late. The world, before 'better' men had their petty wars, had been quite pretty.

If he behaved, tidied, she'd try to find more toys in the rubble to decontaminate and bring home. He kissed her cheek for luck as he helped her into the bio suit. Ben thought her so brave to go out there in the green gunk, scour the streets for food and half burnt books she retrieved from the gutter to stay his boredom.

The windows were covered in thick soundproof glass to still the screams of monsters. The sun had not penetrated them or the sky since the nukes had covered the world in dust. "I know I'm a handful, Mom, but after all these books I just want to see the sky, to see if it's as beautiful as I dream."

"Not yet, sweetie. There's much out there that will hurt you. I told you about the monsters that mutated after the radiation."

Ben nodded and wiped his eyes. He knew he was being ungrateful. If not for her bravery in going out there every day in the wasteland they'd have starved long ago. Maybe the last two survivors in the whole world.

"We'll talk about this when I get back." She smiled and told him to get back as she worked on the seal around the door.

"I love you, Mom," he said like always, a lucky charm in case she did not come back.

"I love you too, sweetie," she said, then breathed deep to lock her knees to take her weight and closed the door behind her.

Outside the sun shined brightly and summer bees buzzed round the watered lawn.

There was no death, no decimation.

Mother sniffed the pollen from her nose and calmly stepped out of her bio suit, the glass visor glittered in the strengthening sun and caught her neighbour's eye as he pulled the weeds.

"Hey, Jane, how's the world treating you?"

Mother dusted her business suit clean, watched him distrustfully and got her car keys from her purse. She'd be late for work if she didn't hurry.

There had been no war. The buildings in the city still stood and in her home, Ben would be safe from a world full of dangers. She believed in wrapping the most precious things in cotton wool.

The man on the other side of the fence shrugged and returned to his gardening.

Strange woman, kept herself to herself.

But he supposed it was only natural she didn't mingle with anyone, hardly left the house since she'd told people at work her son died a few years back. At least that's what she'd told them.

He waved once as her car moved off into traffic and raised his face to warm in the sun.

Such a beautiful day.

The Door to Forever

Tim Tobin

Doors. They open, they close. They swing and they slide. They are French, Dutch, garage, storm and screen. They are wood, aluminum and brass. They are hinged and they are bifold. Doors are on buildings, houses, apartments, warehouses and palaces. Doors keep people, animals and pets in and out. In M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs*, wooden doors even kept aliens out. There is a classified report that the Apollo astronauts saw a door on the Moon. Silly, right? To paraphrase Poe, Doors, Doors, Doors.

The ubiquitous door is rarely thought of as sinister. But I know of a door that is feared, respected and avoided. I have seen this door in the desert, in the jungle, in the mountains and even on the ocean. It looks like any bedroom door and seems pretty benign. Except that it floats alone in the middle of nowhere. There is no frame around it; it is just a door.

My job is to find the door and count the number of times it opens and closes. There are two hard parts to my job. The first one is finding the door since it is constantly on the move. Secondly, it is extremely hard to decide if it has opened or closed. Watching this door is tedious work.

Sometimes I have to wait weeks or even months to get a report of a door just, well, just standing there, somewhere. Then I am off by plane, train, ship, car, horse or camel to get to the door before it moves. And then I count. My boss is very explicit in his orders to me. Count the number of times the door opens and closes.

I never see anything pass through the door when it opens or closes. My boss doesn't seem interested in what is using the door, just in the fact that it is being used. So, my time is spent waiting, traveling and counting and then the cycle starts again. I have tried to catch the door as it moves, but, alas, I have never seen it move.

Sometimes I have to put up with kibitzers while I wait for the door to open and close. People wonder why I am staring at a door apparently suspended in midair. My orders are to chase these folks away as best I can. My boss tells me the door is dangerous. Honestly, I find that hard to believe but I do as I am told.

So far I have spent almost forty years chasing the door. My boss recruited me directly out of college. My major was mathematics but I have

never even had to add one and one on this job. Wait, travel, count; yes. Mathematics; no. Oh sure, at first I thought the job offer was ludicrous. The reasons for the attention given the door were vague, but I got to travel and I was paid. “Well” would be an overstatement but the travel has been worth it.

There has been no time for a wife or family. On the few occasions I met someone, I ruined the relationship by taking extended, unexplained trips. To watch a door. Open and close. My only friend is the boss who hired me. Yes, he is still there and looks not a day older than when I first met him.

Me? I have started to get grey hair and pee at night more often than when I was a young man. I wonder what will happen when I retire. Will the boss replace me? I don’t know if I replaced anyone. I was merely told to catch the next plane to Africa. The door was floating in the Sahara when I arrived by camel.

Many, many times I have speculated on the function of the door. Was it indeed sinister? Were spirits passing unseen through the door? Was the door the terminus of a wormhole that aliens used to visit earth? Does it open to another dimension in space and time? Or maybe I was tripping on a drug and hallucinating.

Or was it all a dream? TV shows like *Dallas* and *Newhart* tried that. Bobby Ewing woke up taking a shower and Bob Newhart woke up in bed with Suzanne Pleshette. I always liked her better than Mary Fran so I was happy he was just dreaming of Vermont. But I have digressed from the story of the door.

You might also ask if I ever went through the door. I did try that once when the door was on a cliff in the Alps. The weather was bitter cold and spectators were smarter than me and stayed indoors. The door had been in place for days and had only opened and closed a couple of times. (Maybe that’s how the Abominable Snowman gets to the mountains? Oh, stop that!) I was bored, cold and ready for the door to move on so I could go home. With all that time to think, my imagination was working overtime. What was the door for, anyway?

So I decided to try to open it. I started by pacing around the door. It was shut tight. How did I know that? Experience, I guess. I think I mentioned that a floating door without a frame does present some challenges. Anyway, I saw the doorknob. Had that always been there? Must

have. I reached for it and turned it. The knob turned all right but the door did not move. It just floated. I looked closer to see if there was a lock on the door. Nope. But it would not open, or close for that matter. I kept trying but the door would not budge. Eventually I just resumed watching it.

Chasing a door that bounces around the world is getting harder. So I have decided to ask the boss about retiring. I am old enough and I am tired enough. My life style has been Spartan so I have money in the bank. I am also intensely curious if he will tell who I have worked for all these years. And will he tell me the purpose of the door?

So, after an exhausting trek home from Tibet, I go to see the boss. He works in a nondescript office building pretty much unchanged over the decades. His office has a desk, chair, telephone and a guest chair. No windows, no doors except for the entrance.

He greets me warmly and, of course, closes his office door. He agrees that it's time for me to retire and congratulates me for so many years of faithful service. He asks me what I will do to fill my retirement hours. We both laugh when I tell him anything but travel.

What will he do now that I am retired, I ask? Without hesitation he tells me he will see what today looks like.

"Today is a beautiful day," I say.

"I'm so happy to hear that," he replies.

His listens politely and carefully to my questions. Who do we work for? What is the door really? Why does it move apparently haphazardly around the earth? Why is it important to know how often it opens and closes?

He gets up and starts to pace around his small office. Clearly he is thinking over my questions.

"You've never been told because it is too wonderful to accept," he begins.

Sensing that my questions will finally be answered, I pay close attention. Finally he decides and looks at me.

"The door is the passage to Forever," he says.

I am stunned. Clearly a door that floats has some paranormal meaning, but Forever?

"Heaven?" I ask cautiously.

"Hmm," is his reply, "No, not really. Forever is, well, forever."

He went on to tell me he had encouraged the idea of a sinister door to keep the curious away but there is nothing sinister on the other side, just Forever. He saw me struggling with the concept.

“You simply have to accept the idea. Faith,” he tells me.

It is my turn to pace around the room bursting with questions about Forever.

“Why,” I ask him, “are the number of opens and closes different and why does the door move?”

Again, he looks into my eyes, and into my heart.

“A paradox of Forever; Forever moves in both directions.”

Finally I ask who he works for.

“Everyone has a boss,” he tells me.

His demeanor says that I will learn no more.

I gather my courage and my curiosity.

“May I see what’s on the other side of the door?”

More hesitation on his part. Just then his phone rang. The sound startled both of us. He looked at the phone as if it had never rung before. Cautiously he picked up the receiver. He did not say Hello, just listened for a few moments. He hung up and spoke solemnly.

“Yes. You may see Forever.”

He led me to a door at the back of his office. Where had that come from? I have been in this office many times and I am certain it had not been there before. He turned the knob and held the door for me. I stepped into a small office with a desk, two chairs and a telephone.

The boss looked around his small office knowing his job was done. Forever was in safe hands. He turned the knob of his office door and for the first time, the door to Today opened.

Typical Love Triangles

Francesca Angelique Carrillo

In Which Howard Imagines Himself as a White Snake

“Howard, I'm expecting,” his wife told him that morning. There was a rosy color to her high, sculpted cheekbones. She looked as she always did in the morning - professional, sleek, not a perfect strand of her glossy black hair out of place.

“You're not going to say anything?” she finally said at his silence. He resumed reading his morning paper, sipping his coffee as if she wasn't there.

“You were up all night again,” she paused, as if she wanted to say something more, but didn't. He knew the silence unnerved her. The woman was incapable of shutting her mouth, even for a few minutes. He on the other hand, loved the apartment at this time of the morning. It was eerily but pleasantly quiet now that their little goblins had left for school.

Her perfectly manicured fingers impatiently tapped the dining table, making a distracting sound. He felt like taking a pair of pliers from his toolbox and ripping them off one by one. He looked at her impassively instead.

“We'll discuss this later. I'm running late. I know you love your dangerous hobby but for God's sake, keep away from the kitchen appliances and remember to clean the mess in the kitchen,” she reminded him. Her heels made a distinctive clicking sound on the floor as she left, slamming the front door behind her.

Now the vice-president of an up-and-coming company which she incorporated years ago, she and her business partner had just recently launched a chain of beauty salons which offered ridiculously priced spa treatments and facials. She was rarely home these days.

Her business partner was similarly perfect. One of these days, Howard suspected that she would be leaving him for Mr. B and taking their disturbingly perfect children with her.

As she spent most of her day and her nights too with Mr. B. Howard doesn't deny that he's jealous. In fact it's been eating him inside out, clawing out of him inch by inch, painfully, until it tears him apart. The

jealousy drives him against the limits of his sanity, it makes him aggressively possessive.

At night he would leer menacingly at his tired wife and force himself on her. One of the few things he liked about her was her unfailing tenacity, her willingness to fight him every time. Finally spent, she would lay defeated, her eyes filled with undisguised disgust and hatred. He grasped her slender arms, restraining them above her head.

“Howard - I'm tired, I'm not in the mood,” she would tell him repeatedly, like a broken toy. But he would drape himself over her, imagining himself to be a pale white snake, coiling and uncoiling its powerful muscles, slowly suffocating the life out of her.

“You belong to me,” he reminded her. She was too tired to resist. He liked the fact that his grip would leave a ring of bruises in the morning.

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Howard and his mistress both stared at the gray flecks of his apartment building as if the accumulated dust could provide some answers – and, as usual, it did not.

They both lay exhausted; their pale bodies wrung and dried out. Feeling empty, cheap and used, Howard tried to suppress expected feelings of guilt. Mrs. P finally regained her breathing, swinging her unattractive legs off the bed where Howard had fucked his wife only a few hours ago. She began picking up her discarded clothes on the floor. Her unappealing, bent over body reminded him of a haggard hen who, incapable of laying eggs - was only good for being served on the dining table. The image of his pale, reed thin body brutally pounding against her flab of flesh on the mattress made him grab her arm.

She shook him off with a tired smile. “Maybe another time, Howard, I need to pick up Mikey from school, his principal called.”

Howard fell back against the sheets, not answering her. “Well then, this was fun. Text me?” she added, a hint of desperation in her voice. She looked weary, the lines on her eyes were more prominent during the daytime, Howard observed.

Knowing that he wouldn't bother to respond to her meaningless chatter, Beatrice turned the knob of the bedroom door to leave. “Take care, Beatrice,” he said, much to his surprise and hers.

Left alone with his thoughts, he tied the belt of his favorite robe around his awkward frame, put on his slippers and walked to the dining room, which held an impressive display of shelves filled with framed family photos. Beatrice cringed whenever she saw them. She seldom liked coming to his home but when he demanded it, she had no choice. Howard thought he had a streak of cruelty in him and liked that about himself. He liked little of himself as it was.

His eyes lingered on the photos on his shelves; his mouth, a hard, unyielding line. The photos looked cut out from a *Hallmark* greeting card or a glossy family magazine. His wife was perfect in every photo, along with his three children who all look like her. Unchanged in all the photos, he looks the same as he does now; absurdly tall, pale and balding - an outsider peering in. Sometimes he couldn't believe that the three grinning imps in the photos were his offspring.



### The Whirlwind Romance, A Decade or So Ago

The first time he saw his wife was in a fashion magazine. He was then a twenty-something, real estate agent whose only asset was his smooth tongue. His first real experience was in a public bathroom at the train station near his home. He was locked alone in a filthy stall and felt his body shudder as he expelled a long, satisfying breath. His abnormally long pale fingers pressed against the graffiti covered walls of the tiny stall as he steadied himself and gazed dreamily at the cut-out picture of the model he had clumsily taped to the door.

He quickly became a chronic masturbator, taking the picture with him everywhere. Frequently he entered public bathrooms and other public places which thrilled him no end. He would take out the picture and quickly fumble for the zipper of his pants.

The moment when everything changed was when one of his colleagues from work caught him in the act. He guiltily zipped his pants, his face a crimson mask as his colleague picks up the slightly wet cut-out. An unsettling smile appeared on his handsome face.

“You want to see the real thing Howard? I can introduce you to her. I know a friend who knows a friend,” he offered as he approached Howard



with a tentative smile on his lips. Howard felt foolish with his hand still on his fly. The larger man touched his shoulder as he leaned in closer.

“Just his touch felt like a violation,” Howard remembered thinking.



In person, she was everything that he imagined her to be. He imagined that when he touched her, she would painfully come alive and become unbelievably hot and malleable under his hands. She is in fact, all that he imagined her to be and sometimes it was a little disappointing. But he constantly has the urge to always touch her, to assure himself that she was solid and that she was his.

When she told him that she was getting married to her agent, her bright eyes shining, he felt something vitally important inside him break. When her wedding invitation arrived in the mail, he tore it to shreds. He refused to speak to her for years.

He found himself a hobby; he moved into his own apartment and immersed himself completely in his career. The next time they met, she was discarded, broken and divorced - a far cry from the vibrant woman with the unexplainable fire in her eyes. After going through several failed relationships, Howard wasn't picky. They began dating at once and in no time at all, she had recovered. She was still young, in love, and suddenly had ideas of starting her own business.

“I'm telling you, baby, you're only heading for failure. But if you want to use your own money then its fine with me,” he said. She was financially broke from using all her personal savings as a start-up capital for her business so she moved in with him.

“Marry me and I won't let you go,” Howard proposed and she agreed.



He thought holding his first born in his arms would infuse him with indescribable feelings of affection and love. It did not. It was the same for the twins. In fact their striking resemblance to each other - their smooth alabaster skin and striking eyes, repulsed him in such a indescribable

fashion. Right there and then Howard decided that the only way he should deal with his children was to regard them with indifference.

“Here, can you hold her while I change her brother?” his wife asked him. Unthinkingly, he automatically held out his hands. With the tiny beast now in his arms, Howard tentatively placed it away from himself as far as the length of his arms allowed. The thing began to cry.

Howard was at a complete loss, he had no idea what to do. For some reason his jaws felt glued together and comforting words refused to come out from his dry lips. His hands felt sweaty, he was glad for the giraffe-print cloth separating his flesh from the infant's.

Howard imagined that the twins came from the same flesh mold, a perfect alabaster ball which eventually developed sharp pointed teeth, allowing itself to tear itself apart and form two black-haired, blue-eyed monstrosities.

He barely felt the weight in his hands begin to slip. In that fraction of a second, he knew he could have protectively swept it back into his arms, rock it to sleep and watch its tiny eyes drift off to sleep and maybe finally feel some semblance of normal human emotion towards it.

Howard knew something was profoundly missing and wrong with the entire setup. He knew at the back of his mind that this wasn't his first time handling a child so it shouldn't have been difficult. Howard's fingers loosened, his gaze impassive as it slipped. His wife nearly broke her ankle catching the infant.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” her accusing eyes began to fill with tears.

She clutched the infant close to her breast and murmured words of consolation. The infant's eyes seemed darted briefly to Howard, giving him a smug look before falling asleep, safely in his mother's arms.

“I'm sorry,” the words were stuck in Howard's mouth. Instead he offered her a hand to help her up which she refused. “Don't ever come near our children again!” Her words were a vehement curse. The next day, she embarked on finding a suitable full-time maid.

From that time Howard had never touched his children, he didn't believe it was such a loss.



## In Which Mr. B Tries to Seduce Mrs. Howard

Mrs. Howard had been his business partner for three years now. He found her stunning, driven, soft-spoken and smart - or perhaps not so smart after all. For three years, he had endured every moment Mr. Howard elected to demonstrate his ownership rights to his wife. The snake clearly wanted to provoke Mr. B at every opportune moment, emphasizing that Mrs. Howard was his exclusively.

Mrs. Howard entered their shared office, her face averted; making sure that he could not see her puffy, crumpled face. She dabbed her handkerchief into her eyes, wiping her runny mascara. Mr. B knew she had been crying.

He looked up from checking his e-mails and asked, "is something bothering you?" She shook her head, efficiently taking out her hand-held compact and make-up kit from her bag. In less than a minute, she was herself again.

Even though he knew it was unprofessional, Mr. B left his seat placed a comforting hand over hers. "Is it Howard?" he asked, his voice concerned. She pulled her hand away. His eyes narrowed as he spotted the cleverly concealed bruises beneath her blazer.

Mr B was listed as one of the city-state's "Successful Entrepreneur of the Year" and quoted as one of the city-state's "Most Eligible Bachelor". He never had a problem meeting young, beautiful women who would do anything for him. But he desired no one except Mrs. Howard. "Has he been hurting you?" He shook her slight frame this time and she pushed him away. Her eyes were suddenly cold and unfeeling.

"Don't ever touch me again," she hissed. Mr. B backtracked to his desk and they resumed work as if nothing happens.

"When we move into our new location, I want my own office." Her lips were pursed, her hand on the cell phone on her desk, caressing it with her slender fingers as if it was a pet.

"Of course. Is that a new phone?" he asked pleasantly.

"It's my husband's." Her mouth formed an unsettling smile. "I heard you successfully managed to obtain a 'Concealed Firearms Permit'."

He was relieved at her sudden change of topic. "It's tough, especially in this city. I had to go through a ton of paperwork. Are you interested in guns? Perhaps one weekend I can bring you to the shooting

range,” he said suggestively. Mrs. Howard knew he could be very persuasive.

“Perhaps,” she answered, much to his surprise.



At lunchtime Mrs. Howard waited for Mr. B to leave the office first. His handsome face looked disappointed as she declined his offer for lunch. “We have a management meeting later, one of us should be on-time for a change,” she reminded him.

Mr. B noticed that her smile did not quite reach her eyes but thought nothing of it. When he had gone and the office had emptied for lunch; Mrs. Howard took a breath before walking over to Mr. B's desk. She pulled the lower drawer of his desk open to reveal a worn-out looking handgun.

Mr. B's deceased father had been a policeman who died in the line of duty. He died chasing after his wife's drug dealer. From what she could piece together from Mr. B, she also knew that the elder Mr. B also liked his drink far too much and often let his fists do the talking. “Poor young, emotionally scarred Mr. B who did not like being touched - no wonder learning self-defense was on his list of hobbies,” thought Mrs. Howard.

She probably knew him more intimately than any of his would-be fiancées. It gave him such a kick to propose to young, healthy-minded girls. After dating them for a few weeks, he would abruptly cut all ties with them, reveling and savoring their misery. In some ways, he was no different from her husband. “It's nice to know we all lead fucked-up lives,” Mrs. Howard said to no one in particular.

She lifted the only keepsake Mr. B's father left his son; it felt heavy in her hands. Recalling the article on the internet, Mrs. Howard checked the fully loaded clip. Nodding in satisfaction, she familiarized herself with holding the gun and then aimed it carefully at her husband's cellphone lying innocently on the desk. It was vibrating, coming to life on its own.

“Die, bitch!” She shouted as she fired right into the smiling image of their neighbor Beatrice who appeared on the touch screen of her husband's phone. The bullet hit the side of the expensive gadget. The pieces of metal and plastic came apart easily and scattered across her desk.

Feeling slightly relieved, she dropped the weapon in her designer handbag. She checked her *Facebook* page on her desktop and skimmed to

her husband's list of friends. She clicked on Mrs. P's profile. Mrs. P had linked her smart phone's in-built GPS to her *Facebook* account; it frequently posted her present location to her friends.

Mrs. Howard suddenly remembered the advice she gave to the young journalist who interviewed her and Mr. B for a business magazine last week. "If you want to succeed, never depend on others, it's best to do everything yourself." Mrs. Howard repeated her advice to an imaginary audience.

Before she left, Mrs. Howard scribbled a note to Mr. B, apologizing for the fact that she would be slightly late for the management meeting.

## Somewhere

*Jason Sturmer*

Somewhere,  
Hooks and chains  
Hang amid peeling  
Olive wallpaper  
On rusty nails  
Once hanging  
Pictures  
Of other times—  
(Before the walls  
Shrank and took  
All the air away).

Somewhere,  
The gentle tapping  
Of fingers on the  
Sharp edge of a  
Machete leads  
Up to the  
Shadowed body  
Of a man whose  
Head is a  
Broken  
Light bulb.

## **Mail for Kyrene Sandin**

***Jordan Elizabeth Mierek***

Kyrene Sandin lived across the street in the white Victorian with black shutters and a green veranda. Every morning, at approximately nine o'clock, she opened the front door, stepped outside, and stretched. She always wore a pink bathrobe. Depending on the weather, she'd either have on snow boots or slippers, but rain or shine, she'd slip out her door in that pink bathrobe to retrieve yesterday's mail and today's newspaper from the metal mailbox hanging off her railing.

The mail came at four o'clock in the evenings, but Kyrene would wait until the next day, fetching it in with the paper. She'd stride like a young woman of twenty rather than an elderly woman of... considerable years. I had no idea how old she was.

She had lived across the street for as long as I could remember, which says a lot since I'd been born in my house, inheriting it when my parents moved. Even as a child, I'd been entranced by the woman in the pink bathrobe who lived in the "big white house" with the yard of daisies.

Kyrene had always had long white hair, plaited in a thick braid down her back, the end tied with a black ribbon. Sometimes she would wind the braid around her head and pin it in place.

I might not know her age, but I did know one thing: Kyrene was an assassin.

It glimmered in her eyes, a keen intelligence that saw everything, missing nothing. It was in her walk, that calm saunter that never staggered, never slouched. The very tip of her head screamed that she was someone to beware.

She had purchased the Victorian when her husband died, just a few years before my birth. The rumor mill said he'd died overseas in an accident, but anyone with a brain could tell that was only a ruse. He'd been on a mission and failed it, apparently.

Maybe his wife's enemies had gotten to him, forcing her to move otherwise they would kill everyone else she held dear to her heart. Kyrene, or whatever her real name was, clearly had tons of enemies. Anyone with that kind of attitude, like in the snobbish pout of her lips, was bound to turn friendships sour. Take into account that she was an assassin and her enemies

were probably stalking her door, which was right across the street, always gave me the shivers.

Kyrene kept to herself, apart from a little bit of conversation thrown out from time to time. Her lips would curve a bit on the ends and she'd nod. If you asked her a question, she knew the answer, whether it was historical or scientific, such as "Do you know President Grover Cleveland's first name?" and she would reply, "Stephen." If you had an ailment, she told you how to cure it with herbs. The same applied if you had a stain on your shirt.

She also knew everything about everyone in the neighborhood. How she knew so much could only be due to her training, or perhaps they were on her list, which is another thing that gave me the shivers. When discussing them, she'd use such detailed statements.

"Ah, yes, Jill Thompkins has been working late hours at her location of employment, but it's because her boss is retiring due to his bad knee and wants to train her for the position."

Once when I ran into her at the grocery store, literally, might I add, since rounding the corner caused my cart to crash head on into hers, I felt the urge to speak. I offered some inane comment about the weather and she lifted one eyebrow, a perfectly slim eyebrow, and asked me if I suffered from an overwhelming compulsion to converse. Not knowing how to answer that, since it was scarily true, I stood gaping like a fish, my little daughter asking if I was all right.

Kyrene had laughed, said something that sounded French, and wandered off. That was another thing about her; she spoke every language, fluently. She made no secret of it, either, but she'd never say her own nationality.

Whatever country she hailed from was also her employer, paying her for her assassinations. She was rich as well and no one knew how. She never spoke of any inheritances or jobs. If she did work somewhere, it couldn't be nearby, for no one saw her working and besides that, she held odd hours. There was no set schedule for her except for the nine o'clock mail gathering.

She had new cars, too, once every other year, all of them small and black. Obviously she needed new cars. I doubt bloodstains come out very easily even with herbal expertise. It was probably why she always wore black, other than that pink bathrobe. She had a model's figure, tall and skinny, even with her gathered age. If she only dyed her hair, you'd never



know she wasn't thirty. She didn't have any wrinkles. The white hair, of course, was premature. Assassinating people for a living is bound to do that to you. It's also bound to give you a tight body like that, too. You can't slink through shadows at six-hundred pounds, I'm assuming.

The proof that shut up my husband over my constant accusations centered on the fact that she never went anywhere without gloves on. Even getting the mail, her fingers were covered with black leather – odd in itself because she made no secret of being a vegetarian. She was careful about her fingerprints, afraid of being tracked and followed, hunted down for the career she'd opted for. Even to get her mail, she was fearful.

Then one day, she didn't get her mail... or rather, she didn't get *all* of it. When my son brought in ours at four o'clock, he waved a particular envelope overhead. It was pastel green with red ink, the cursive at a slant across the front.

"Hey, this isn't ours!" He struck my thigh with it. I took it from him, holding it close while nibbling my lip. It was for her, Kyrene Sandin, and it was from Scotland. The return address lacked a name.

The elderly woman across the street worked for Scotland as a secret assassination, or perhaps just someone in Scotland... a wealthy baron with enemies in America he wanted picked off.

"Oh dear." I smiled at my wide-eyed son. "I wonder who this belongs to." Still smiling at him as if my mind weren't racing, I slid my long fingernail under the envelope flap and popped it open. I pulled out the card inside, and froze, blood draining from my head until the room began to spin.

Maybe it was wired, this birthday card with a giant frosted cake on the front. Was Kyrene going to come after me now? I stared at the card, my mouth so dry I could have spit cotton.

It was too late now. I opened the card. The calligraphy read a little blurb: *Cheerful wishes for your birthday*. The only handwriting was a name at the bottom. Joseph. The sender... unless it was a code, all of it, the blurb and cake cartoon and everything.

She'd know if she didn't get it. I stuffed the card back into the envelope. My son gawked at me.

"It's for Mrs. Sandin," I announced. The card wouldn't go back into the envelope and I ended up stuffing it back in, swearing when I saw the rumpled mess I'd concocted.

I'd seen her leave, swaggering out of her house as if she were the queen of the world... which she might have been trying to be, for all I knew. Maybe she was planning on picking off world leaders.

I felt like she stared at me, though, from all the windows in her house. My legs felt like jelly as I left my porch, heels clicking on the driveway. The air felt too hot, too heavy, as if it tried to suffocate me. Her house glared at me with black eyes, for she kept curtains of black lace in every window.

I waited for a blue van to jet by before I ran across the road with the obnoxious clickety-clack of my high-heels ringing in my ears. I panted by the time I grabbed her green railing beside the mailbox. I lifted the lid, about to drop the letter in, when my breath caught in my lungs. She had other mail in there and the top letter wasn't addressed to Kyrene Sandin. It was for Miriam Krumgold.

Such could have been an accident, of course. The wrong name or the wrong address. The odd thing was that, as I casually leafed through her other mail, two other letters were for Miriam Krumgold, not Kyrene Sandin. The woman lived alone.

She had an alias. She had false names! My heart raced and everything spun again. The clicking of metal brought me back.

A man walked a golden retriever up the sidewalk in front of my house and he stared at me as if I was doing what I really was doing, going through someone else's mail, a federal offense. I dropped shut the mailbox lid and darted up her veranda, knocking on her front door as if that had been my intention all along.

The dog stopped to sniff my rosebush and the man kept eyeing me, so I glanced in the windows as if waiting for Kyrene Sandin, or whatever her name really was, to come to the door.

One of the curtains was pulled back, fastened to the wall, and I could see walls of pale lavender. There was a piano with a black-and-white picture hanging over it of a stern-faced woman, the strong attitude clearly the same as Kyrene's. There were oriental vases on the top of the mahogany piano and the floor was hard wood. There was a fireplace off to the side of the piano and hanging over it were crossed swords, not the decorative type. Slice and dice, ask questions later kind of weapon. I'd told my husband she was dangerous.

The man and his dog rounded the corner, so I darted down the veranda to the next window. She had daggers and throwing stars on her wall! I felt as if I was going to faint, but when I lifted my hand to my brow, I found the birthday card still clenched in it. Wow, great, awesomeness... I ran back to her front door, opened the screen to set the card between them and Kyrene's sleek black car pulled into the driveway.

Oh.

No.

Still holding the card, I straightened, facing her head on with chin jutted. I couldn't just run. That screamed suspicion.

She opened her car door, got out, shut it and walked up the steps of the veranda. "Can I help you?"

"Um... well... this came to my house... and... I opened it... accidentally... so, um... here." I flung it to her, wondering if she was going to attack me for it. No, not out here in the open.

She smiled. "I wondered when this would get here. It's from my brother Joe. He lives in Scotland. He's a writer like me."

"A... a writer?" She wrote?

"I'd assumed everyone knew that. I write a historical mystery series about assassins. My publisher says I have an eye for details." She nodded toward her house. "I also collect ancient weaponry, swords and their ilk. My late husband got me into it. He used to reenact for Renaissance Festivals before his accident. One of his mates got drunk and accidentally cut him. He bled to death. Even though it ended so horrendously, I still miss those days. It's where I learned about herbs." Tears glistened in her eyes. Embarrassed, I dropped my gaze, landing on her gloved hands holding the card. She must've noticed my stare.

"I'm a bit of a germaphobic." She sighed. "I can't break myself of always wearing gloves. At least I can still find pleather ones. Would you like to come in? I can brew us some tea. I grow my own mint plants." She tipped her head. "I can also show you some of my novels. I write under a pen name. Miriam Krumgold."

I felt beyond stupid, my face afire. I stuttered through: "I thought you were an assassin!"

For the first time in my memory, Kyrene laughed. "I'm no more an assassin than you are." She took her house key from the pocket of her black jeans. "You will come in, won't you?"

Blushing, I stuttered through an affirmative. She stepped aside so I could enter first. As I did, she brushed a gloved hand over my shoulder and leaned over, stilling me. Her breath singed my ear.

“Rule number one, my dear, is to always give credit to first impressions.” The front door shut behind me with a resonating boom.

## The Voice of Doing Time

*Jeff Jones*

Brad Hunter woke with a start. Despite waking in the same bunk staring at the same piece of ceiling for the last seven years, it still took him a while to remember where he was. In his dream he'd been running hand in hand with his wife along a tropical beach, the azure sea gently lapping round their feet. Angela had been young and beautiful just like the first day they'd met, not the bitter woman who'd visited him a couple of years ago and announced that she was divorcing him. *Bitch!* It had been a glorious dream, but someone had gone and ruined it and now his mood had turned sour.

At least he still had the photograph to look at. It wasn't of Angela, those pictures he'd destroyed in a rage that cost him two weeks in solitary. No, this was the wife of another inmate. He'd taken the picture from some loser. She was too good for him. Waking up every morning and seeing her pretty face smiling back down at him made life bearable. Just.

Brad lay still trying to work out what had woken him, though he already had his suspicions. After all, it wasn't as if the prison had a vibrant nightlife that kept him awake into the small hours. After a minute of listening to nothing but the occasional cough and the sound of distant footsteps as one of the guards patrolled the corridor, Brad decided that his instincts were right; Fat Tony had been snoring. The cell was silent now.

*The fat idiot must have gone and woken himself up as well.*

Tony Marando, or Fat Tony as he was to his friends, had been Brad's cell mate for three years. After a difficult start the two men had hit it off and become good friends. They had also become business partners involved in just about every shady venture possible in prison. Brad was the brains of the outfit whilst Tony's bulk naturally made him the enforcer. The arrangement was mutually beneficial. That didn't give him the right to keep waking him up, though, Brad decided.

"Thanks a lot, man, I was just in the middle of an awesome dream," said Brad. Tony didn't reply. "I know you're not asleep, Tony, because it takes you longer than that." Tony's continuing silence was starting to rile Brad. "Hey, I'm talking to you, fat boy." His lack of response was bordering on the disrespectful.

Brad swung his legs over the side of the bunk and jumped down. Tony was lying facing the wall. Brad kicked his ass, but Tony didn't respond. He kicked it again; still nothing. Brad bent down and grabbed his friend's shoulder; it felt clammy. He gently rolled Tony's considerable bulk towards him. Something was wrong, but in the dismal light Brad couldn't tell what. He fumbled for his lighter and after a couple of flicks, a small flame appeared, barely denting the surrounding gloom.

Holding the lighter in front of him, Brad leant down over his friend's body and let out a small cry of shock when he saw the deep gash across Tony's throat. He stumbled backwards hitting his head on the underside of his bunk as he did so. Cursing, Brad wiped Tony's blood from his hand and onto his tee shirt and was about to shout for a guard, when a shuffling noise from behind him drew his attention.

Brad's mind was racing. *Who had done this and how did they get in their cell?* He knew that there were plenty of jealous cons who wanted him and Tony dead, but how did they get in there? *They must have had help from a guard, unless it was a guard.* That wasn't a comforting thought. It was then that he caught the first whiff of something burning. *Was the prison on fire?* He was still considering that when he heard the noise again.

He spun round, the lighter stretched out before him. Inching towards him was a man in an inmate's uniform, his face and hair badly singed. The man's face was vaguely familiar, but in the dim light Brad could not immediately identify him. When he drew level with the lighter that changed.

"You," was all he had time to say before the man leapt at Brad and clamped his hands tightly around his throat.

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"What's the time of death?" asked Warden Hendricks as he massaged his left temple and fought the rising tide of nausea.

"The Doc. here says it was somewhere between 3 and 4 a.m. Cooper noticed them a little after 6 a.m.," replied the guard.

"And he didn't see or hear anything suspicious?" asked the warden.

"No, sir. Said it was as quiet as a church except for someone crying out in their sleep."

Just thinking about the paperwork and the ensuing inquiry made the warden tired.

The doctor stood up from where he'd been examining Brad's body and gestured for the medical orderlies to remove it. Tony's body had already been carted off to the prison morgue.

"So what's the cause of death, Doctor?" asked the warden, wincing as the little man with the pick axe above his eye hacked away.

"Well, based on a preliminary examination I would say that Marando died from a cut throat, the deep gash running from ear to ear being a clue."

"And Hunter?" The warden was in no mood for the doctor's sarcasm.

"Well again I need to make a further examination but at first glance it looks like he choked to death, but only after Marando had nearly strangled the life out of him. There is severe bruising round the larynx."

"Choked on what?" asked the warden.

"On this," replied the doctor handing a crumpled piece of paper to the warden. "It was stuffed halfway down his throat."

The warden unravelled it with a look of revulsion. It was a photo of an attractive blonde woman.

"So who's this, Hunter's wife?"

"Must be. The picture used to be fixed to the ceiling above Hunter's bunk," replied Cooper, who had just joined them.

"So Hunter and Marando fell out over a picture and killed one another?" asked the warden.

"Strange way for Marando to kill Hunter don't you think, stuffing a picture down his throat? The guy was big enough to snap Hunter's neck like a twig. Besides, that would mean he then slashed his own throat, which takes some doing," said the doctor.

"Then what?" asked the warden irritably.

"Hell, don't ask me I'm only the doctor," and with that he left to follow the bodies down to the morgue.

The warden bit back a comment just as Senior Correctional Officer Harris entered the cell looking concerned.

"What is it, Mike?" asked the warden.

"There's been an accident, sir."

"Where?"

“In the shower block.”

“What happened?”

“Jacobs appears to have slipped and hit his head,” replied Harris.

“Is he badly hurt?”

“He’s dead, sir.”

“Just from slipping in the shower?” asked the warden incredulously.

“It appears he hit his head several times,” replied Harris.

“Ah, so not so much an accident as someone introducing his head to the floor. Who did it?”

“That’s just it; he was alone in the shower block,” replied Harris.

“You mean no one’s prepared to talk for fear that they might end up the same way as Jacobs,” said the warden. His headache was raging out of control now.

“No, I mean what I say. He was alone in the shower block. Because of his propensity for violence and the incident last week, we thought that best for the time being. Even the three guards assigned to him waited outside,” said Harris.

“And they didn’t see or hear anything I suppose?”

“No. But there was a faint smell of burning when they found him.”

“In the shower block?” asked the warden.

“Yes. Nothing was found, though.”

“So what are you saying, Mike, that Jacobs repeatedly slipped and hit his head? It’s ridiculous.”

“I don’t know how it happened, Warden. All I know is that I’ve got another corpse down in the shower block and the news has already slipped out; tensions are running high. There’s an ugly rumour going round that one of the guards did all this and if we’re not careful we’re going to have a full-scale riot on our hands,” replied Harris.

The warden nodded knowingly. “All right, initiate lockdown. I want every prisoner confined to their cell until we can get to the bottom of this.”

Harris looked pleased with the warden’s decision. “Right away.”

“Oh, and Mike, call in every off duty guard you can get hold of just in case; we’re going to need boots on the ground for this one.” Harris nodded and hurried off to organise the warden’s orders. “Has anyone seen Dale Mitchell?” Both the nearby guards shook their heads. “Well when you do, tell him I want to speak to him, will you?” With a last disgusted look

round, the warden left the cell as the process of herding several hundred disgruntled prisoners back into their cells began.



A little over an hour later the warden sat in his office sipping a glass of water. His headache had finally started to recede and the lockdown of the prisoners had gone well thanks to the no-nonsense approach of Harris. That still left three unusual deaths to report and the small matter of CO Dale Mitchell not turning up for work. Mitchell was the warden's best friend, a friendship that went back decades. In all the time they had worked together, the warden had never known his friend take a day off sick. They'd tried ringing him at home, but there'd been no answer and so not being able to spare any of his CO's the warden had asked his secretary, Carol, to drive round to his house and check up on him. He was just wondering what had happened to her when his phone rang.

"Warden Hendricks."

"Warden, it's Carol." There was a catch to her voice as if she'd been crying.

"Carol, are you all right?"

"It's Dale, sir, there's been an accident... he's dead." The tears she'd been struggling to hold back broke free.

"Dead? How, what happened?" asked the warden, keeping his voice level as he tried to get through to an increasingly hysterical Carol.

"There was no answer when I knocked on his door so I looked through the letterbox. I could see what looked like a body lying on the floor motionless. I phoned for an ambulance and they arrived with the cops. They broke in and tried to revive him, but it was too late."

"How did he die?" asked the warden.

"They won't tell me much, but I overheard the paramedics say that he died from a massive electric shock. He's burned almost to a husk."

Without replying the warden hung up the phone and leant back in his chair. It was only mid-morning and already four people, including his best friend, were dead. It truly was going to be a long day.



Officer Rick Tyler meandered down the corridor outside B Block, glancing occasionally into the various cells to make sure everyone was asleep. The prisoners had been in lockdown since just after breakfast that morning and had been none too pleased. They'd shouted, jeered, banged their tin trays against the bars and made a terrible racket, but Tyler didn't care. If it was up to him they'd be locked in their cells twenty-four hours a day. Nor did he care that three of them had apparently been murdered; three less scumbags to worry about as far as he was concerned. What he did care about, however, was the fact that a lot of people seemed to be pointing the finger of suspicion at him. Nobody had yet had the balls to say it to his face, but he'd overheard it a couple of times and not just from the inmates.

So he'd been a bit overzealous on occasion with one or two prisoners; so what? It wasn't as if they didn't deserve it. They were criminals, after all. But he'd never killed anyone. Never had and probably never would unless his life was threatened. He still retained the right to hand a good beating out every now and again, though.

He was just considering heading back to the guard station for a quick coffee, when he noticed the door to storeroom four down the corridor to his left was ajar. There was nothing valuable in there or anything that could conceivably be used as a weapon, but the door was still supposed to be locked at all times. Wondering which of his incompetent colleagues had been negligent in their duties, he crept towards the door. When he got outside he stopped and listened. He couldn't hear anything but he thought that he caught the faint wisp of a burning smell. Erring on the side of caution he drew his baton and quietly entered the room.

He flicked the light switch but nothing happened, so he reached for his torch and slowly swung the beam about, checking that everything looked okay. A noise from the rear of the room behind some tall shelves distracted him and, after adjusting his grip on the baton, he cautiously approached. When he was no more than a yard away, he heard the door slam behind him and spun round, shining the torch in its direction. Standing in front of the door, his head hung down looking at the ground, was a man in an inmate's uniform.

"What the Hell are you doing here?" challenged Tyler. The man didn't respond. "I'm talking to you, prisoner; what are you doing here? Why aren't you in your cell?" Again the man didn't reply. "Okay, you want to do it the hard way that's just fine by me."

He started towards the prisoner, raising his baton as he went, but just as he was about to strike him, the man looked up. Incomprehensible recognition flashed across Tyler's face and he hesitated. "What are you...?" He never got to finish his question as the prisoner suddenly lashed out and knocked him to the ground. Before Tyler could react, the inmate picked up the baton and began laying into the stricken guard.

Tyler's screams woke the nearby inmates and, as word spread that Tyler was taking a beating, they began to cheer and whistle. By the time his colleagues arrived to investigate, it was already too late.



Arlen Mendez lay staring up at the ceiling, unable to sleep. Sometimes being in solitary confinement had its advantages, but this wasn't one of them. Something big was going down on the wing and he wanted to be there. One of the guards had told him about the mysterious deaths the previous day and a short while ago he'd heard a lot of cheering that sounded like it was coming from B Block. Punching the guard and getting twenty eight days' solitary didn't seem such a great idea anymore.

The sound of footsteps slowly making their way down the corridor outside caught his attention. It was unusual for the guard to be patrolling this late at night but perhaps he too was unsettled by the recent events. He might not be too bothered about the demise of the inmates but he'd certainly feel the loss of Dale Mitchell, one of his colleagues. None of the inmates would mourn his passing, though. The prison's executioner wasn't likely to be the most popular man around.

Still, it was ironic, thought Arlen, the way he died. The man responsible for throwing the switch on old Sparky killed by an electric shock at home. Perhaps there is justice in this world after all.

The footsteps seemed to stop outside his cell briefly before walking off into the distance. Arlen closed his eyes and tried to sleep. Whatever was going on, there was nothing he could do about it.

He had no idea how long he'd been asleep when he suddenly jolted awake, but his cell was still quite dark. A slight flicker of movement to his left made him sit bolt upright and he was just about to swing his legs out of the bunk and investigate when he was struck on the jaw knocking him flat. His head was swimming and for a moment or two he thought he was going

to be sick, but he regained control of his body just in time to see a man wearing an inmate's uniform looming over him. In the dim light of the cell it took Arlen a few moments to recognise his attacker but just as he did, the man smothered his face with a pillow.

Arlen bucked and struggled to free himself, flailing his fists at the man pinning him to the bed, but he was far too strong, much stronger than his smaller physique would suggest. Just before his last ounce of strength disappeared and he succumbed to the enveloping darkness, Arlen reflected that it had indeed been a bad idea to punch that guard.

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Warden Hendricks had been fast asleep when the shrill ring of the telephone woke him. In his half awake state the warden had to ask the Senior Night Officer to repeat what he had said before it finally sunk in. There had been another killing and this time it was one of his guards who had apparently been beaten to death with his own baton. Still drowsy from the painkillers, the warden got dressed and hurried back to the prison.

Half an hour later the warden was peering at a CCTV screen as the limited coverage played out in front of him.

"That's it?" he asked after watching the film for a third time.

"That's it I'm afraid, Warden. There's no coverage in the storeroom because frankly nobody thought we'd need it there," replied the Senior Night Officer, rather sheepishly.

"Well it looks like we were wrong, doesn't it? So all we've got is Tyler walking along outside B Block, entering the storeroom and then nothing until you and Parker arrive? There's nothing on here showing anyone else entering or leaving the storeroom?"

"That's about it, sir," replied the guard.

"Doesn't that strike you as a little strange, Karl?"

"It strikes me as impossible, sir, but there it is."

"And you're sure that nobody's tampered with the CCTV?" asked the warden.

"As sure as I can be, yes."

"Then what the Hell is going on here? Three inmates and a guard dead – why? What's the connection?"

"Maybe there isn't one," replied Karl.

“These can’t just be random acts of violence; there has to be a connection. We just haven’t figured it out yet.”

“If there is a connection, there might be more victims.”

That was a disquieting thought. “Have you contacted the authorities?”

“Yes,” replied Karl.

“Good. I’ll be in my office if you need me; no point going home now.”

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Arlen’s body had not been discovered until the next morning after he had made no effort to collect his breakfast tray. When one of the guards knocked on his office door shortly after seven, Warden Hendricks knew that it was more bad news.

The guard had told the warden that Arlen’s body had been found lying on his bunk with a pillow over his head, having apparently committed suicide. Ordinarily the warden would have agreed, but hot on the heels of the other deaths it seemed unlikely despite the fact that it was impossible for anybody but a guard to get into his cell. The thought that one of his men was responsible for all the deaths was not something he was ready to contemplate.

After gathering some of his senior staff, the warden firstly inspected the death scene, where he thought he detected a faint burning smell, before returning to the CCTV room; the storeroom on B Block might not be covered by CCTV but solitary confinement definitely was.

“So who is that?” asked the warden as they finished viewing the tape for a fourth time. Although Arlen’s cell was not covered by CCTV the corridor leading up to it was. They had seen one of the guards stroll down the corridor every couple of hours occasionally peeping through the spy holes of random cells to check all was well. Then at a little after four a.m. a man wearing the orange overalls of an inmate appeared in the corridor before stopping outside Arlen’s cell. He paused there for a few seconds before slowly turning and looking up at the camera mounted on the wall. As he did so the picture suddenly and inexplicably became very fuzzy before breaking up completely. From the brief glimpse he got, however, the

warden felt sure that he recognised the man's face, though with all the interference he couldn't be sure.

Nobody answered.

"Is there nothing you can do to clear up the picture?" asked the warden.

"Sorry, Warden, that's as good as it gets," replied the CCTV operator.

"As much as I want to know who that son-of-a-bitch is too, Warden, I think we should also be worrying about how they're managing to wander about the prison with impunity," said Harris.

The warden nodded. "Unless he's not getting out every night and is hiding up somewhere only venturing out at night."

"Maybe, but every headcount we do is coming out right, so that would suggest otherwise," replied Harris.

"There are ways round that, Mike, you know that. Some of these cons are ingenious bastards when they put their minds to it," said the warden.

"True, but I still recommend we keep them in lockdown and do an immediate headcount."

The warden nodded. "Get it done and when it is come and report to me in my office. I've got a mountain of paperwork to get through before I go and see the Governor."

"You've been summoned to the Governor?" asked Harris, surprised.

"Four inmates and a guard dead – what do you think? They're going to hang me out to dry for this one."

"But it's not your fault."

"It's my prison, so yeah it is. You just get me some answers please, Mike."

It was nearly lunchtime when Harris came to see the warden. Harris noticed that the warden's desk didn't seem any clearer than it had been earlier with prisoner files stacked up in untidy piles all over it. The warden looked tired.

"Please tell me you've got some good news, Mike," said the warden as he gestured for him to take a seat.

"Well I've got news, but I'm not sure whether it's good or bad." The warden leant back in his plush leather chair and rubbed his eyes, bracing himself for the worst. "Every prisoner is accounted for as of thirty

minutes ago. I've had two guards review all the cctv footage from last night, but there's nothing out of the ordinary on there, except a couple of the night crew shirking their duties, but I've dealt with that. In fact I've personally spoken to everyone who was on duty last night and they all reported that it was peaceful in here before the assault."

"So what are you telling me that either an inmate has found a way to slip in and out of his cell each night unnoticed or I've got a nutcase hiding out somewhere within the prison impersonating an inmate and committing murders of a night?"

"That pretty much sums it up although there's still the possibility that one of our boys is the impersonator," said Harris.

"I'm not prepared to consider that just yet," said the warden, sitting back upright. "I'm damned sure I recognised him though in that fleeting second he turned before the cameras went. I just can't put a name to the face."

"You want some advice, Warden?"

"What's that?" asked the warden.

"Your meeting's not till three o'clock. Go home, have a shower and something to eat and maybe try to grab a few minutes shut eye – you look like crap and you're going to need to be on top of your game when you meet him."

"Good advice, Mike, I'll do just that. Ring me on my cell if there's any developments, will you?"

Harris nodded and left the warden's office.

The warden stood and picked up a few random files from his desk hoping he might get a chance to read them later together with the newspaper he'd bought but not yet read.

It was bitterly cold outside and the warden hurried to his car, keen to get out of the biting wind. He climbed in, switched on the engine and for the briefest of moments thought he could smell burning. Then he slipped it into gear and headed home.

As he drove he tried to force himself to relax, praying that the tension in his neck would ease and not lead to another migraine; he'd had a lot in the last few months *ever since...* He forced the memory from his mind; he didn't need another distraction, not today.

He was only a couple of miles from his home when the memory resurfaced. As he relived it, he suddenly recognised the man from the

CCTV footage, even though the very notion was preposterous. He pulled over to the road side and prayed that the man's file was one of those that he'd scooped up; it was. He grabbed the file and flicked it open. Paperclipped to the inside front cover was a photograph of former inmate Daniel Markham. The warden gasped at the neutral face glaring back at him. It had definitely been him on the CCTV images outside Mendez's cell, of that he was certain. The only problem was that Daniel Markham had been executed by electric chair six months before for the murder of a family out near Houston.

The warden had always had his doubts about Markham's guilt, but the Governor, police and District Attorney had all been under pressure to resolve what had been a very emotive crime involving children. Markham had always professed his innocence right up until the moment Dale Mitchell had thrown the switch. The warden had tried to delay the execution, claiming that he thought Markham's conviction looked unsafe, but shadowy agents working for who knows whom had stressed that it would be a shame if he were to lose his pension so close to retirement. In the interest of all parties they'd suggested that he should just rubber stamp the file and look the other way. Well he had, but every day since he'd had terrible regrets and feelings of guilt. The stress had even caused him to develop chronic migraines. His feelings of guilt were the reason Markham's file was still on his desk six months later.

No, he was mistaken. How the Hell could it be Markham? He'd watched and Heaven help him, smelled the man die. It was ridiculous.

The names of the people who had recently died flooded through the warden's mind. Brad Hunter and his sidekick Marando had allegedly continually intimidated and stolen from the diminutive Markham, including a photo of his wife. Jacobs had been accused of threatening Markham in the showers and Mendez had put Markham in the infirmary for a couple of weeks. They had all crossed Markham at some point.

Markham had also made accusations towards CO Tyler, saying that he had witnessed some of the offences and done nothing, something Tyler had denied. Consequently the warden had been unable to act. Suddenly all of the attacks made sense except for the fact that Markham was irrevocably dead. Then Hendricks remembered his friend Dale Mitchell. He had been the one to throw the switch and end Markham's life. *Was his death really a coincidence?* Hendricks suddenly doubted it.

He put the file down and was preparing to pull away again when the smell of burning returned. Trying desperately to ignore it and the fact that it had been present at all the murder scenes, he glanced in his rear view mirror and screamed. Sat on his back seat were the remains of a man who looked as if he'd been burned from the inside out. His skin was black and sore and his hair singed. His eyes were abnormally wide and the eyebrows had been burned away. The warden had no doubt that what he was looking at was all that remained of Daniel Markham after his execution, an execution that had initially gone horribly wrong due to a supposed technical fault. Instead of one jolt of electricity it had taken four to kill him completely. The warden had always suspected that one or more of his guards, disgusted by Markham's alleged crime, had tampered with the equipment, but he could never prove it.

Sobbing with terror the warden struggled to release his seatbelt, unable to take his eyes off the monstrosity sitting on his back seat. Then very slowly the thing that had once been Markham leant forward, grabbed the seatbelt and began to wind it around the warden's throat. The warden stopped trying to unplug his seatbelt and instead tried to loosen its grip from around his neck but was unable to do so. Very slowly and painfully the life was choked out of the warden.

A passing cop car found the warden a short while later. Strewn about his car were various prison files and a newspaper. The paper's headline announced the arrest of a serial killer who was claiming to also be responsible for a series of killings near Houston some years back for which a Daniel Markham had already been tried and executed. The initial police inquiry suggested that overcome with guilt the warden had taken his own life.

Passing Judgement

A J Humpage

Spiteful words had killed Christie Connery.

The cold cloud that hovered above the hill seemed close and oppressive and constricted, like a thick rope around the larynx, pressing tight against the skin.

A lasting winter lilt gilded the brow of the hill and formed thin, introspective shadows which slithered along the frosted mounds and worked their way up to the elongated silhouette that shaded the trunk of the barren oak tree. The shadow remained still, except when mocked now and then by a curious cool breeze.

Her half-open, dark eyes stared out across the town just below the hill; her pallid appearance frozen as though trapped within an unending dream. The town sat beneath a fine, slow-descending morning mist. Rainbow vapours glistened. Feathery clouds drifted by, unsullied by the icy stillness and untouched by the latent discord that clung to the air.

A soft wintry breath teased her long, flaxen hair. Her expression remained contemplative, despite the stress of the last four months and despite the terrible trauma of the last few minutes. For Christie, desperate relief had come at last.

She had come to the hill to find peace and tranquillity, away from the spiteful words of a town misted by a stifling band of hate and had risen early to catch a beautiful winter sunrise, to be alone and untroubled, to bathe in such beautiful stillness.

No one knew. No one cared.

Sticks and stones might break bones, but words were always sharper and Christie, more than most, knew words were sharper than any blade. Words had an ability to find their target, matched only by the invisible, irascible and lasting pain that they inflicted.

Words could cut deep. Words hurt.

The discomfort and fear she had felt over the last few months had brayed against her like open sores soaking in salt, and slowly, those imaginary wounds had begun to scar. Mere words – simple words, unchained by reason – had ignited her swift journey into darkness.

But more than the unbearable discomfort of the last few months, she had wanted to escape the claustrophobic veil that had imprisoned her and to flee from the people of the town. To flee from them passing judgement.

Except for the distress of the last few months, Christie Connery's ordinary, if mundane, life had progressed without incident. Although quiet and shy and a little circumspect, she had never been afraid to shine or unfold her petals beneath the brilliant glare of attention when it suited. She possessed a profound, intelligent aura which she would happily share with others, despite her reticent appeal and yet the reality was that few people really knew or took the time to find out about the real person behind the peat brown eyes. She was, after all, an average happy face in the crowd, a passing shadow among many; few knew she was a brilliant teacher and a loyal friend to a handful of people, mostly other teachers from the local high school.

Christie Connery was a nobody in a small, insular, unimportant town.

And now everyone knew her. Everyone judged her. And everyone would remember her.

It was towards the onset of the winter months that her life changed beyond repair, that the simplicity of a passing statement, wrapped in spite and said in feigned innocence, could somehow burden everyone around her with chains of disbelief and seething resentment.

Just a few passing words – from a teenager to her parents – had started a fire; a seemingly innocent sentiment soon unleashed a clutch of accusations which quickly became doused in hysteria and spread through a town dominated by secret curtain twitchers and electronic grapevines ripening with gossip.

But those few passing words had quickly destroyed Christie Connery's life.

The kind of passing words that multiplied from parents to police and soon travelled across the town, spreading like hungry flames creeping over parched wood.

Passing words: *She's so amazing, she understands me. It feels nice when she hugs me and holds my hand.*

Simple unblemished words. Gently delivered and unfettered by any strained sense of guilt.

Three days later the police arrived to question Christie.

At first, they asked her ordinary questions. Mundane questions, the kind of questions that Christie felt obliged to answer, if only to clear up the obvious misunderstanding. But as the days passed, they turned to more personal questions, followed by deep probing questions – the kind of questions designed to illicit the juicier titbits of presumed deeds, real or imagined.

The shock of their intrusion quickly shattered Christie's well-ordered senses and rendered her dumb momentarily – but the police misunderstood her reaction and thought her nonchalant. The emotion gradually gave way to a terrible heavy feeling which settled in the pit of her stomach, as though some strange acid was eating through her flesh from the inside and leaving a slurry-like trail.

But the frothing fizz of realisation gradually encroached on her senses and the initial pleasant whiff of helpfulness soon gave way to latent incredulity once their questions became more intrusive, but despite the insidious nature of their tone, Christie had answered them without questioning them in return. She remained truthful; too stunned to shake fizzling brain cells into life. She had tried to maintain a sense of poise as they chipped at her resolve and managed to curtail any urge to overreact, for fear it would make matters worse.

She told them that she was a private English teacher with several young students. Some of the children had not coped well with schoolwork and therefore needed extra help. Then there were those with wealthy parents; the kind who wanted their offspring to have extra tuition in the push for university places. She often provided cover at the high school, too. Her job paid well, it varied and she enjoyed it.

But despite the feigned politeness, the probing nature of Detective Stone's questions instantly forged a distance between him and Christie and in time, it would forge a distance from everyone else.

Christie clearly understood what they wanted to hear from her, but the truth was quite different, quite ordinary. And yet they pushed, asking her over and over, hoping she would slip up and blurt out the sordid truth.

"I really don't understand why you're asking me these questions," she said to them.

"To find out the facts," Detective Stone replied, brusque. "This is a serious allegation Miss Connery, we need to get to the truth, however long

it takes.”

The truth. Strangled by the mire of presumed guilt.

She showed open palms. “But I haven’t done anything.”

“That’s for us to decide, Miss Connery.”

Her words sounded hollow in her tiny, cosy front room. “Look, Detective, I’ve told you all I know, there isn’t anything else. You’ve got all this wrong. This is a complete misunderstanding.”

Detective Stone didn’t even look at her. “There are two parents that think otherwise, so let us be the judge of that.”

“Nothing happened. How many times do I have to go through it with you?”

“As many times as it needs and until we’re satisfied,” he said, cold. “I don’t think you’ve grasped how serious this is, Miss Connery.”

“I’m more than aware of how serious this is, Detective,” she said, as though to paint such intrusion with blame. “Put yourself in my shoes, if you were faced with an accusation like this, then you’d appreciate how serious it is for me too. It’s my job on the line here. This whole thing is ridiculous.”

“It’s not ridiculous, Miss Connery; it’s reality and we treat it as such,” Detective Stone said. “It’s serious for everyone concerned. We’ll be in touch.”

They visited her several times over the following weeks, surreptitiously moulding and shaping her answers into something salacious and wicked and slowly Detective Stone began to build a fragmented picture of Christie Connery’s life.

She puzzled him, yet his disdain for her remained untainted.

Christie Connery, an attractive thirty-four year old, lived by herself and had no immediate family to speak of. She had moved to the area four years previously and had regularly worked with local schools and charities and had – until that point – remained a quiet, unassuming member of the community. They had checked her background, but it came back completely clear. Clean. Not even a parking ticket.

Once again, they asked about her latest pupil, Sydney Shaw. They asked if she and Sydney were close.

Of course, that depended on the definition of close.

Rather than describing her relationships with her pupils as close, Christie chose instead to define them as trusting and friendly, but she could

see the brooding shade of Detective's Stone's incredulity.

Initially – during those first tentative weeks of questioning – Christie had risen above the suspicious cloud and remained calm as she explained to them that teaching was the most important thing in her life, that for her it was not just about imparting knowledge or wisdom, or coaxing achievement from her pupils, but rather it had more to do with building a trusting bond with them – otherwise, she told them – teaching would be quite pointless.

Their expressions in return said so much to Christie's subdued nature. The jagged edges of the detectives' stares frosted over and discord seeped in like thick, oily pus from an infected wound.

Astute, she knew what they were thinking. She needed no words.

And yet, a part of Detective Stone wanted to believe her.

But beneath Christie's outwardly calm exterior, a frenetic storm blew to life and poisoned her insides with an abject fear of the unknown; she did not understand why this was happening to her, why they suspected such awful things, why indeed Sydney Shaw would say such terrible things in the first place.

When they asked her again if she had ever hugged Sydney, she replied with the truth.

"Yes, we hugged. That's it. Absolutely nothing was meant by it."

"We have to be thorough investigating this complaint, Miss Connery," Detective Stone said in response to her darkening eyes and disquieted expression. "Do you have contact with all your pupils?"

"I make it minimal," she replied. "Professional. But it just isn't possible to be compassionate without a squeeze of a hand or a pat on the shoulder; otherwise we would all be better off made of granite."

"So you broke protocols on contact," he said, but it was delivered like a statement.

Her voice remained soft, if quiet. To deflect the question. "I really don't understand this, it's absurd. Why would Sydney say such things?"

"The complaint came from her parents, not Sydney, that's all I'm going to say. We have to follow it up and investigate. This process will take a while, weeks certainly, so you should be prepared."

"Prepared for what? I'm a teacher. I've taught for the past ten years. It's my life, I love what I do. This kind of rubbish could end all that."

“We realise that, Miss Connery, but unfortunately it counts for nothing in this investigation. Just be prepared.”

Prepared for prosecution, he meant.

“I’ve seen it all over the years, Miss Connery,” he said. “You’d be surprised what really goes on behind closed doors. Especially behind the doors of the people we entrust our children...”

The fear sat heavy in her stomach, unwilling to expel. With each police visit, the uncertainties grew heavier and more disdainful and the colour of suspicion in their words burrowed deeper into her conscience like a cold, unrelenting steel screw.

After their final visit, she closed the door to them, against them, grateful that she didn’t have to face them a moment longer, but in reality, she was closing the door against herself and against the constant inward gnawing of tumult.

Their accusation – Sydney’s accusation – drove a deep fear and loathing into Christie’s chest; deep enough to score lines across her insides to leave a lasting, constricted feeling that gnawed at her from within. She struggled to understand, to make sense of what was happening to her. In truth, she was afraid to make sense of it.

And she had no idea of the black sentiment sweeping around town.

She had ventured out after the first police visit, but immediately she noticed the mood of the town had changed. The atmosphere seemed different. People stared at her, through her. People she used to chat to every day now turned away in ignorance. Some spat at her, smothering her face with sullied saliva in a vain attempt to wash the sin from her, while others shouted abuse at her, the angry hiss of their words scathing against her soft skin like sandpaper.

She couldn’t forget their knotted, hateful faces, scowling like an angry pack of wolves, branding her memory with the heated, gleamless look of disgust in their eyes.

Sticks and stones might break bones, but cruel words, even softly spoken, always hurt. And now they were growing painful.

Cruel words could penetrate the quiet corridors in the mind, too, and forever stain the conscience. Words were a potent weapon; words could be sharp or as blunt as needed. It was easy to stab with words over and over and not leave a drop of blood or a tell-tale sign of violation. Words were

incisors of invisible ferocity and lasting trauma. Words hurt because they could.

She found it profoundly ironic that the deep invisible gashes created by spiteful words rarely healed, they remained forever the ugly scars of human nature, like the dirty vapour trails from shooting stars. They were so unlike real physical scars that eventually healed over time.

She had been naïve to think that the people would treat her as though nothing had happened.

In quieter moments, in the silence of her front room in the early hours, Christie thought back to her lessons with Sydney. She traced movements and conversations months old, she thought back to the time she had tutored Sydney or even stopped to chat in the busy corridors. Then finally, through the bank of misted memories, brief moments in the past burned through her mind.

She realised then. Simple words of praise. A simple gesture of a hug. The touch of a friendly hand. A smile of trust.

She had meant them so innocently and yet they – Sydney, her parents, the police – had grotesquely twisted such simple gestures into something terrible and imagined and she had no idea why.

Christie clearly remembered the memories. But on reflection, she had not paid any attention at the time to Sydney's wistful looks and penetrative expressions, or the excuses to stand close to Christie's tall frame in the classroom and hallways. She had not paid attention to the long admiring glances, instead mistaking them for curiosity and attention to the teaching.

How could she have missed them?

Outside of her protective cocoon, the rumours around town grew heavy and clammy, spiralling out of control and spreading like a vile necrotic disease. The people didn't care to stop the growing tide of hate, it swept them along, intoxicated them. They didn't care about the consequences of unbridled whispers.

Christie's normality soon became an oppressive existence.

It was easier to imprison herself as the days passed, rather than face the people around her. It was all she could do, because with every visit the police had made, they had continually chiselled at her crumbling, fragile resolve – which was fast turning into an ever-decreasing thin crust. There was little left.

But the anger of their accusations also remained fresh in Christie's veins, somehow unsullied by their prejudices and unwilling to go away. She had stuck to the truth – the only truth she knew, yet the stench of presumed guilt lingered and the continual whispers formed a coiling, invisible fortress around her home.

The people of the town painted hateful words across her front door; they smashed her windows, daubed and scratched her car and taunted her from a safe distance while she hid behind her curtains. But she saw their vicious faces – once friends, who had now become sickened monsters gnashing and bearing their teeth with childish impunity. Fearless, furless wolves.

In truth, she felt sorry for them. And in rare moments of respite from the braying mob, she often wondered who the real animals were and where the moral high ground actually began.

She felt maligned like a thick fibrous ball of cancer; she had become an unbearable stench under the noses of those she had once called friends, and the true nature of friendship became apparent after they had turned their heads from her when she tried to talk to them. They had sneered and growled and herded like hungry animals, unwittingly swept along by the flammable power of suggestion. Spite and malice and misplaced thought mingled like a bilious soup to make her life a dark, infested hell.

Even though she had protested her innocence, nobody listened to her, nobody understood, nobody cared. They had not even asked why or how. They were prepared to believe, unquestioning, every word that fell from a child's mouth, because children were, after all, sweetness and light.

Shelley, her best friend, no longer called. Ten years of friendship had vanished within a matter of weeks.

Christie was quick to learn that the entire incident had become an obsession with guilt for those around her, like a flawed fixation. One by one, those she once trusted quietly became distilled by contempt and prejudice. They shunned her completely and any solitary glances on her part were met with disdain and derisive expressions.

Day after day. Hour by hour. Minute by minute. Their harassment never stopped. And each day, their behaviour intensified, becoming more aggressive, more frightening. More unpredictable.

She knew it was only a matter of time before the wolves smelled blood.

After a while she stopped going out, except in the early hours to drive along the darkened road out of town to find the 24-hour convenience store to get provisions, somewhere that no one knew her, somewhere that was just another unimportant town where she was just another anonymous face in a crowd devoid of interest.

She realised that her words of truth meant nothing against that of a child. Her truthfulness was stacking up against her rather than supporting her and no court would see it favourably, so she reconciled in her mind what she needed to do and she consoled herself by taking the pain they inflicted upon her by turning it inward, like a last gasp of a dying star. She began weaving all the hurt and pain and vicious words into a sturdy rope.

Sticks and stones might break bones, but words...

Scum. Sicko. Dirty bitch.

Every one of their words hurt; they sliced through the dermis and wriggled like maggots beneath her skin, working their way around her body until finally worming their way into her mind to pick and nibble, to thin out the rationality from within.

Parents removed their children from her tuition classes while the police continued to investigate. With no work, she struggled to pay the mortgage and the bills. She couldn't turn to friends for help; there were no friends to turn to anymore. She had no family, no life outside her fortress. No one was going to help; no one was going to employ a suspected child abuser.

No one would listen. No one wanted to hear the truth. No one cared.

By early December, it began to snow.

She could no longer stand to imprison herself, to live in constant fear.

Wrong accusations fell like snowflakes on ignorant faces and evaporated into the tinselled stillness the day she ventured out in the early morning frost – while the rest of the wolves slumbered in their beds – and she walked to the barren tree on the hill.

The rope she had forged was strong and firm.

A melancholy sound, like an oboe's deep plaintive soliloquy, drifted through the cold air and hung in mournful repose. Although driven by her fear and depression, she would bring normality back to the town, she

would put an end to the whispers and speculation and hatred. She would take back control, on her terms.

But there was no room for hesitancy. Just sheer, resolute determination.

The cold air gathered.

It took only a few seconds before the rope creaked against the chilly air and clasped the delicate skin of her neck. Bones softly crunched.

Christie Connery dangled in silence from the oak tree on the hill, free at last from them, free from the dark evil cloud of presumption and prejudice. Free from spiteful words of contempt, free from passing judgement.

The rope she had forged turned out to be her saviour in the end.

Vilified and shown up like a stain, she had beaten them to it – she had beaten them to the sticks and stones.

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That morning, half a mile away, a 15-year-old girl finally buckled beneath her self-forged, black concrete shroud and stepped forward to tell the police what had really happened that day late in October. Unable to hold the guilt any longer and seeing what had happened within the town; Sidney Shaw told the police the truth.

She sat in the interview room with her parents and Detective Stone.

“So come on, Sydney, what’s this about?” her father asked. “What’s so important that you had to drag us here?”

Sydney hesitated at first, then, “It was me.”

Detective Stone leaned forward. “Say again?”

She didn’t look at him. “It was me.”

“What do you mean by that, Sydney?” he asked.

Her mother looked bemused, pacing in the background.

“It was me. I initiated the hug with Miss Connery because...” she trailed off, because in truth – the part she hated to admit to anyone – she’d had feelings for Christie for a while, but she knew those feelings were not reciprocated. An empty teenage crush.

So spite played a part in her plan.

“Because what?” Detective Stone pushed.

“Because I liked her and I thought she liked me,” she said, her hands finding a way to her mouth as though to stop herself from spilling the truth. “But she didn’t feel that way...”

Her mother moved into view. “Sweetheart, I don’t understand.”

“I wanted to hurt her,” Sydney replied. “That’s all. I know she never felt for me in that way. I just wanted her to hurt like I was hurting.”

Detective Stone sighed. “So you thought you’d punish her.”

Her mother’s face melted like wax. “But sweetheart, you told us it was your teacher. You said she touched you.”

“Well it wasn’t her, okay?” Sydney spat. Latent tears felt like sulphuric acid against her skin. “I lied. She never touched me. It was me; I hugged her, not the other way around. She never touched me in that way at all. But the truth is, I wanted her to, but she just shook her head.” She took in a controlled breath. “I said those things because I just wanted to her to suffer... because she didn’t like me that way.” She stared at her mother. “And then the whole town jumped to conclusions. By passing judgement.”

“What were your parents supposed to believe?” Detective Stone asked. “They quite rightly acted on what you told them.”

“We had a right to protect you from someone like that,” her mother said, provoked. “Who knows what she could have been up to with those kids behind closed doors?”

Sydney’s dark eyes shifted. Her expression bubbled with disdain. “I never needed protecting, especially not from Miss Connery. I hugged her. I did it because I wanted to be near her all the time, I really liked her.”

Her mother’s face creased. “But Sydney, that’s not normal behaviour; you’re supposed to like boys.”

Sydney sniffed. “Didn’t you know? There’s no such thing as normal. But go ahead and hate me. You’re all a bunch of hypocrites anyway.”

Her father didn’t look at her. “Do you have any idea what you’ve put that poor woman through? You’re going to have to apologise to her.”

“And so are all of you,” Sydney shot back. She looked at her father, then her mother and finally Detective Stone. “Look, I didn’t expect it to go this far, I didn’t expect the town to turn into a hungry mob, smashing her windows, wrecking her car, writing childish comments over her door, yet that’s exactly what you all are, you’re a bunch of nasty, hateful animals.”

For once, Sydney Shaw had silenced those around her. The truth crept silent-footed around them like a satanic shadow, dusting their minds with contempt and guilt in equal measure, for they were all guilty of unspoken prejudice in one form or another.

But the truth had come too late. Christy Connery dangled in silence from the giant oak tree on the hill, as a gentle frost descended to silence the town.

Spiteful words had killed her.

Whispered, from a girl with a crush.

## **Thunder Lizard**

*Kevin L. Jones*

Alfred hated to be locked in all night in the mall but his supervisor had told him that he had to work the graveyard shift or lose his job as a security guard. He cursed old man Johnson as he made his rounds through the silent shopping center. Johnson, a retired police officer, usually worked these late night hours but he had disappeared. Not only had he completely vanished but had apparently flipped out before he had gone to wherever he had gone. The old timer must have really pitched a fit by the look of the food court. That section of the mall looked like a tornado had touched down there.

Alfred shook his head as he surveyed the damage and muttered, "What a goddamn mess!"

Although hasty repairs had already begun on the food court, it didn't look as if he would be buying a hot dog on his lunch break there anytime soon. He shrugged his shoulders, luckily that was somebody else's headache; all he had to do was keep the rest of the mall from getting trashed. A fairly simple task considering that if somebody wanted to get inside they would have to get past steel gates and locked shatter-proof glass doors.

Alfred came to the play area in the center of the mall where his parents had brought him many times when he was a child. In the middle of the playground stood two huge plaster statues of dinosaurs, one was an orange stegosaurus and the other a fierce looking dark green T-Rex. As he looked at the unmoving thunder lizards, a million happy memories came flooding into his mind of playing beneath the gaze of the stone dinosaurs. As he took another sip from his thermos of hot coffee his bladder suddenly felt full. If he didn't make it to the restroom and soon, he thought he would wet his pants.

Luckily he made it just in time and averted disaster. As he washed his hands he began to hear a terrible racket almost as if the mall was being torn apart. He ran out of the restroom not even able to begin to imagine what could possibly be making that terrific clamor. When he saw the source of the noise he thought he had gone soft in the head. The playground's plaster T-Rex was impossibly alive and apparently very hungry. It had smashed its way into a Hickory Farms store and was gulping down

mouthfuls of summer sausage. Finally the horrid living statue took notice of the petrified security guard. The nightmare thing let out a fearful bestial roar as it propelled itself towards its next intended meal. Seeing the T-Rex lumbering forward finally set Alfred into motion and he ran till he thought his heart would burst but it did no good, the beast was just too fast. It overcame him and knocked him to the ground with its hard plaster muzzle. Before he disappeared down the monster's gullet he finally realized what had happened to old man Johnson. He began to laugh madly as he slid down the lizard's throat and as he did so an absurd thought crept into his mind at least he would have company in the T-Rex's belly.

## **Instant Justice**

*David Frazier*

He closed the door  
Crept toward the bed  
Knife glistening in moonlight  
The ebony night hid his face  
No one identified him.

A man hated with all his heart  
Laid in bed  
Back to the door  
The clock ticked on

Plunged the knife deep  
To the hilt  
Twisted it thrice  
Making sure

He couldn't rise  
To breathe anymore  
As the clock ticked  
Chimed at twelve

Raped his wife of  
Twenty years,  
Beautiful Lenore  
Faithful to him

The mongrel lay, knife in his back  
Instant justice  
Sent him to hell  
Which is what he deserved.



## **Breaking The Borders**

*Ron Koppelberger*

The glass separated the doctors and technicians from the test subject. The barrier was a precaution that Shehoff had insisted on. He figured that the odds of the subject getting loose were thin and none, nevertheless he felt more comfortable with the barrier in place. The test subject milled back and forth behind the glass, peering out at the lab coat wearing techs and nurses from time to time. The partition was smeared with blood and a sickly yellow ooze that had leaked from his hands. His brain was still functioning at a lower level of understanding, almost an animal instinct, a knowledge borne of captivity.

Shehoff had been a member of the Vine tech facility for three long years. He had his pension coming and after this particular subject concluded he would hopefully retire. Shehoff looked at the glass separating the subject from the controller's observation deck. The man, if you could still consider him that at this point, was leaning against the glass partition. He had a tired look on what was left of his face, loose skin and pustules covered the surface of his features as well as most of his body. Shehoff felt sad for just a moment, the briefest of instants. He had been human after all, now he was just animate flesh and contractions, mechanical momentum brought on by the drug, Hester 874.3, the H as they called it had the curious effect of reanimating the dead.

They had thought it to be impossible when the Vine's lead supervisor defined the project for them. They had discovered a toxin that reacted with the basic requirements of animation, centering in the mid-brain at a lower level of function. Bernie was their first test. He had been given the drug and had responded in significant measure, reanimating, almost seeming alive at times. That hadn't told the researchers that he would smile and cry and laugh as he had when he had been alive. Shehoff had convinced himself that those were ghost moments, the absence of real emotion, just a mechanical response to the H.

Bernie had worked one of the bed rails loose from its iron bolted frame and was swinging it wildly at the glass. Shehoff was startled by the expression of rage in his face, he almost seemed angry.

“Get someone in there to calm him down!” he yelled to one of the techs. They stood there and looked at him as if he were out of his mind.

“We can’t risk infection, Shehoff, you know the toxin acts as a virus to the living.” Shehoff knew the end result of infection was death and reanimation.

Bernie screamed and Shehoff looked scared for a moment.

“AAAAARRRRRRRRRRROOOOOOOOOTTTTTTTTTT...  
OOUUUUUUUTTTTT!” He sounded as if he were speaking to them for a moment. One of the lab techs said, “We’re used to it. Lately he’s been screaming like that. It’s like he knows, almost sounds like he’s yelling to get out.”

Shehoff shivered and sat down in one of the leather office chairs that were situated behind the partition. Just then the glass splintered and broke. Bernie fell forward halfway through the glass with the momentum of his swing. The glass gouged deep rents in his flesh but he didn’t bleed or act as if he was in pain, he just laughed and crawled into the control booth.

Bernie’s laughter was the last thing Shehoff heard as he panicked and fell unconscious.

The day passed and the sun rose and fell as night approached the New Mexico desert facility with tendrils of something ethereal and unbidden. Shehoff awoke to find the techs all dead, torn to bits and partially eaten. Shehoff looked out of the observation room into the hall. The emergency lights were flashing and there were screams coming from the other side of the facility. The Vine had really done it this time. The dead would walk, he knew the virus, the toxin would spread rapidly through the population once contact was made with the outside world. Bernie sat in a chair opposite Shehoff and he knew in that moment he would never live to see that end result.

Bernie was chewing his finger and moaning at Shehoff. He had dressed himself in one of the white lab coats, it was smeared with the blood of the technicians. There was a gob of crimson near Bernie’s smiling mouth, he had been hungry and the techs had been there for the taking. Shehoff realized that they hadn’t had a chance. The H gave the subject superhuman strength and there was no sense of pain, he knew there was no really effective way of stopping him. Shehoff knew he would only have one chance at this thing; he lit the match and threw it to the floor. There was a small puddle of gasoline from the portable centrifuge near the center

of the floor. The gasoline ignited and Shehoff prayed that the facility and Bernie and all of the test subjects would burn to ash. He stood to leave when Bernie hit him. Shehoff fell to the floor and didn't move. The sirens screamed and Bernie somehow made his way to the front gate. It had been torn loose from its hinges.

Bernie stood outside the burning facility, he had some sense of warmth from the flames and his eyes dilated with the brightness of the fire. Cool air rushed in from the desert feeding the flames and causing the night sky to reflect an eerie orange light. The facility was fenced in by a ten foot razor barbed barrier, the techs who escaped and some of those who had been reanimated had left the gate open. Bernie wandered through the gate and headed toward the bright glow that came from the distant town of Halo. Bernie laughed for a moment, smiled and moved forward toward the city. The night wouldn't reveal her secret until the dawn.

## Brother

*Carmen Tudor*

Emilio searched through the crowd but couldn't find the familiar face. He turned around and was beginning to walk away when he felt a hand come down upon his shoulder. He jumped and turned around.

"Leaving without me, little brother?"

"Joseph Hunter!" Emilio said in his best imitation of their father. "Joey." He ran his eyes admiringly over the good looking man with golden hair and wondered if this was really his brother.

Joey narrowed his eyes. "It's Johnny now. My agent thought it sounded better."

Emilio smiled broadly at his brother and instinctively reached out his arms, but Joey took a step back and shook Emilio's hand instead. The brothers lowered their eyes and Joey laughed nervously.

"So, Mister Movie Star, how's life? Had any work lately?" Emilio asked as he led the way from the busy airport.

"There are a few projects I'm being considered for. I did a toothpaste commercial in May."

Emilio's eyes darted to his brother. "That's great. Which brand? Is it on TV yet?"

"Squeaky Clean. Well, I was more like one of the background extras," Joey replied, and added quietly, "I was Plaque."

"That's really great. I always knew you'd make it."

The brothers sat in awkward silence on the ride home, but Emilio glanced at Joey every few moments, taking in his unnaturally white teeth, his tan and his wavy hair, which was blonder than he remembered.

"Anyway, how is he—Dad?"

"Not so good. The doctors said another one will kill him."

Joey nodded. "You look different—good," he added distractedly. "Older. You all right?"

Emilio cleared his throat. "Y'know... okay."

"Going to school?"

"When I can."

Joey sighed and rolled his eyes. "You're going to school. That's not a request."

“It’s hard, Joey. I’ve gotta take care of Dad and the house, y’know?”

“It’s Johnny now, remember?”

*Thirteen months*, Emilio thought. *Has it really been that long?* They drove on in silence until the heavy atmosphere broke.

“Look,” Joey continued, “School wasn’t for me, but you’ve got a brain, kid. Use it.”

Emilio leaned back and shook his head. He had plenty to say, but doubted whether the words would be heard.

The brothers arrived at number 1043. It used to be home, but now it felt unfamiliar to them both.

Joey surveyed the overgrown grass and the decrepit house. Sinking lower in his seat, he sighed with disgust. Emilio wondered exactly when it was that his brother had forgotten his roots. Or was it that he’d remembered, but turned his back?

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The brothers lowered Joey’s second-hand luggage to the floor and sat down at the kitchen table. Joey scratched his arm and Emilio jumped up. “You want something to drink? I can get you something to drink if you want.”

Joey pulled a re-filled bottle of Evian out of his backpack and held it up in response. Emilio sat down. “Joey, I’m glad you’re back. There’s so much stuff we can do. I mean, now that you’re here we can really fix this place up—”

“Look,” Joey interrupted, “First of all, please, it’s Johnny now. Second, I’m not staying. All that stuff, well, it’s a good plan, but it’ll have to wait.”

Emilio’s face reddened and he said, a little too quickly, “Yeah, sure. Of course. I know that, but... how long are you staying then?”

Joey’s gaze rose and he scanned the flickering bulb over the table “A week, maybe two. Just until Dad gets better.”

Emilio sighed. “Well, he’s not getting better. He can’t; he’s just not getting better.”

The brothers looked at the tabletop and then at the walls. As their glances fell to the floor, Joey rose from his seat and slipped out of the room.

The air remained heavy with unspoken thoughts and forgotten promises. *Strangers*, Emilio thought. *Just like strangers.*

That night Emilio dreamt of the past. He saw images of himself and his brother as children. He saw their mother packing her bags. He saw Joey vow to take care of him. And he saw his father after the first stroke.

Then he saw Joey leave. *I gotta do this, kid*, he'd said. *I've gotta get out of here. You'll be all right, I promise.*

Emilio hid his face in his pillow and beat his fists into the mattress. Why couldn't his brother stay? he wondered. Was it his fault? Did Joey even care anymore? Had he ever cared?

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The sun rose slowly the next morning. Night had a way of lingering when it was least wanted. Joey woke to find Emilio cleaning the house and suspected this was the usual before-school practice for the boy. He wore a long nondescript apron as he dusted and then washed the dishes.

"Hey, I'm heading out to see the guys today. It's been a while, so..." Joey eyed their mother's apron around Emilio's waist. Perhaps there was some meaning there. Perhaps a silly tie to the past that he just couldn't give up. He let the thought go.

Emilio grabbed a duster from next to the sink and then searched his brother's face. "Don't you wanna go to the hospital today? I told him you'd come to see him."

Joey cleared his throat. "There's plenty of time for that. It's not like he's going anywhere."

"Like me, you mean?" Emilio lowered his gaze and continued to clean in swift strokes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Emilio put the duster aside. He undid his apron and tossed it onto the kitchen table.

"I said, what's that supposed to mean, Emilio?"

"Figure it out."

Joey eyed the apron, which had fallen to the floor. "Whatever. I'm outta here," he said. "I got stuff to do."

The house was silent except for a tired click as Joey closed the door behind him

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When Joey returned home that night, Emilio came and stood before his brother. “Why did you do it, Joey? I need to know, so at least give me that much.”

“Do what?” Confusion clouded the young man’s face.

“You left me.” His voice trembled with restraint. “And now you’re gonna do it again. I get it, but give me an answer. Put it into words for me.”

Joey saw the tears glinting in his brother’s eyes and laughed with embarrassment. “What, are you... crying?”

“Why do you do it?”

“Do we have to do this? Really?”

“Why did you leave?”

Joey’s smile disappeared. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Why did you leave?” Emilio reiterated.

“Just leave it alone. I said you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Why did you leave us?” Emilio wiped the tears that were streaming down his cheeks.

“Emilio—”

“Why did you leave me here?” Emilio shouted. “I was just a kid, Joey. How could you do that?”

“Emilio, I... ” Joey cleared his throat and looked down at his brother with steely determination. “I don’t know who you think I am, but I’m not that person. I never was. This,” he said, and scanned the room, “isn’t me. This isn’t my life now. I’m sorry,” he added with a note of petulance, “but I can’t do this.”

Emilio’s tears threatened to fall again, but he understood now. He nodded.

“I’m... sorry.”

“So am I,” Emilio replied.

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A week later Emilio drove his brother to the airport. Neither spoke as Emilio glanced at Joey and wondered why he—just like his golden tan—was fading.

The brothers walked side by side through the terminal. Emilio watched Joey as he stepped through the boarding gate, and as he was about to disappear, the boy cleared his throat. “Johnny!”

Joey stopped and turned around. He smiled brightly and pointed to his ear. “Sorry. Can’t hear you, kid,” he mouthed, and continued walking.

As Emilio walked away, he thought about his brother and the ties that bound them. He thought about familial responsibility and whether it existed in reality, or whether it was something that loving families invented for the sake of stability. He didn’t know for sure. And he wasn’t sure he cared anymore. But as he drove away and headed to the hospital, he sent up a silent prayer that his brother would one day change his mind.



## **The Voice On The Phone**

*Ken L. Jones*

Nick Fontana had come into the comic book writing business in a really strange way about a year and a half ago. After trying for five years to break in by flooding the New York City desks of any editor that would sit still for it, and getting nowhere, he finally hit on an unorthodox plan. He would network his way in by doing interviews with the top pros in that industry. This wasn't very hard to accomplish because he had a lot of contacts amongst the so-called fans of comic books as well as an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of comic books and other related areas of popular culture too. So he cleverly parlayed all these qualifications into an introduction to William Wrath, the editor-in-chief of The Rack.

The Rack was the number one comic book industry trade magazine and also its saltiest. The whole tone of the magazine was childish and snippy, especially Wrath's wordy editorials but still it cracked the whip and was the taste maker for all things comic book. It was very influential in its many sister industries as well. Whole companies and careers rose and fell on being in its good graces and the plum of the operation was to be the subject of a full-length cover featured interview in it. Now this of course was a two edged sword because the interviews were brutal and very personal and insulting sometimes. For years they had mostly been conducted by Wrath himself or by one of the office flunkies who lived with him in the big rented California mansion that also served as the company's production headquarters. So it was that outsiders rarely got to provide such an interview for The Rack.

Just prior to this Nick had served a season as a kind of a one man band for the second best selling comic book industry trade magazine. He had done practically everything there, including over two dozen interviews that saw print, sometimes several in each monthly issue. As Nick had hoped, this had attracted a lot of attention and won him some very well placed friends within the ranks of the comic pros themselves. He never lost an opportunity to tell these new friends of his ambition to become a full-time comic book writer himself. His season at Comic Book Inner-Views Magazine was intense and ended abruptly over some point of order that he and his publisher couldn't resolve. Fontana abruptly switched over to The

Rack where Wrath was happy to welcome him, both because Nick did very literate well thought out and researched interviews and for the fact that this was a hard slap in the face of Inner-Views' publisher whom Wrath hated with a passion.

So Nick was soon ensconced at The Rack and was cranking out one major interview after another. He was seen as a star on the rise in the industry on account of it. Because of all this he became even closer personal friends with every important top pro in the industry and they all opened every door that they could for him both as an interviewer and as a budding popular culture word smith, too.

One particular pro, Armando Alpaca late of the Philippine Islands, became like a second father to Fontana and his family. Because of his amazingly detailed artwork and his flamboyant personality, Armando knew and was known by everybody. They called him "the Elvis of the comic books" in that business. Armando freely shared all of his top flight contacts and phone numbers with his "American son" as he called Fontana so sincerely.

All these new contacts were amazing and extremely helpful but one of them was pure gold because it belonged to Dietrich Akaveesh. Akaveesh was one of the true mystery men of the comic book industry, but nobody knew exactly why that was. Despite being one of its all time top and most creative artists, he was rarely seen by anyone and few claimed to know much about him personally, not even his bosses at Massive Comics where, amongst other things, he had once co-created what eventually became their top selling as well as most iconic title.

True that had been two decades back and Akaveesh had long departed to work on his own quirky sort of right wing characters at a variety of small poverty row independent comic book publishers since then, but the fact remained that modern comic books and their wide acceptance had as much to do with Akaveesh as what rock and roll owed to the Beatles. Everyone in the know acknowledged that too.

So it was that Fontana was ecstatic when he and his wife were out to dinner with Armando at his favorite Filipino restaurant and when the topic of Dietrich had come up during the second course of the meal, Armando had carried on at length about Akaveesh and his achievements and how discriminated against and picked on that man had been.

Fontana asked Alpaca if he knew him and Armando said, “Just as a voice on the phone but him I liked. Very humble and friendly. Would you perhaps like his phone number?”

Nick couldn't believe what he was hearing and could only nod and chuckle to himself at this great turn of events. It took a week for Fontana to work the nerve up to do so but finally he was ready and he called Akaveesh. The older man was leery at first until Fontana explained in detail who he was and what he wanted and the people they knew in common. Then the artist relaxed and started treating Nick like he was an old poker buddy of his. These phone conversations grew in both length and intimacy over the next month and during them Fontana came to like Akaveesh a lot. He especially got a kick out of the way he talked and how funny he was which reminded him greatly of such favorite comedians of his as Alan King and Phil Silvers. At one point during these long distance calls Fontana was emboldened to ask Akaveesh if he might interview him for The Rack and he was absolutely stunned when the publicity shy Dietrich readily agreed to do so.

William Wrath was both jealous and ecstatic at this sudden turn of events and uncharacteristically sprang for the cheapest round trip air travel ticket for Fontana that he could find. Before he knew it Nick was taking his first ever ride in an airplane. It was hardly any secret that Fontana was deathly afraid of flying and so to accomplish this he had to knock himself out with some Seconals that his family doctor had obligingly prescribed for him. It was a good thing that Fontana was unconscious because most of the trek back to New York City was through one violent weather front after another which caused all of his other fellow passengers to make liberal use of the barf bags provided. Fontana's sleep was deeper than the Marianas Trench and consisted of nothing but feverish replays of his many conversations with Akaveesh.

Akaveesh had often talked about the occult which hadn't struck Fontana as that peculiar because he was aptly known for his many eight-page horror comic book stories and also renowned for his co-creation of a certain master of the supernatural arts at Massive Comics. Once, during one of his many conversations with Akaveesh, Fontana had a vivid vision of the other man clear across country levitating off the floor of his living room while he was conversing with him. Nick had told Dietrich about what he

was envisioning and the older man had just chuckled and called him such a kidder.

Early in these conversations Akaveesh had told Fontana that he lived in the worst part of New York City proper, in a building that had been condemned and was about to be torn down. He told him that he was the only one still occupying it and he acted embarrassed about confessing all this to the young lad, especially the part which revealed that he had no choice in the matter because he was totally broke and had no other place to live.

Then Fontana's dreams shifted abruptly with no transition, as dreams often will and he was reliving his youngest days when he first encountered Akaveesh's book about the young lad who was like a spider which Nick had purchased. Everything about those long ago comics by Akaveesh seemed to be fresh and ground breaking but what had impressed Fontana most and continued to stand out in his mind was how authentic that character's trips across the New York skyline seemed as he whipped through it while dangling from one of his own self-manufactured webs. How many times had Fontana asked himself exactly what had inspired this and how could anyone, even the world's most imaginative artist, portray those dizzyingly angles and high topographies with such photorealistic clarity? Akaveesh had never been able to provide an adequate explanation about how all that had worked.

Then Nick's dreams shifted once again and became a jumble of Akaveesh's pathetic comments about how broke and hungry he was after all these years.

Then, after an interminable eon of nightmares, Nick was awakened rather brusquely by one of the not so comely stewardess who told him it was time to depart. JFK International airport in New York City was desolate and storm drenched. With some difficulty, Fontana found a cab and, since the hour was late, he took a small room in the cheapest hotel he could find in town. Again his dreams there were long and troubled and about nothing else but Dietrich Akaveesh.

When morning came, Nick started to feel great trepidation about this trip. Nothing about it reminded him anymore about his boyhood hero who was like a spider or anything that cheery or all American. Instead he was lost in grave and eerie thoughts as he obsessively remembered Dietrich's stories about the earth's greatest magician and the other weird

and unnerving eight-page stories of horror that Akaveesh had created so convincingly over the years.

Using a pay phone, a cab was summoned. It arrived a few minutes later. Given everything else that was transpiring, Fontana half expected a death coach straight out of Dracula, perhaps driven by an only slightly disguised Dietrich Akaveesh. Instead of that he was greeted by a rotund afghan refugee called Habib who smiled a lot and spoke only the most rudimentary kind of English. Habib became very agitated when Fontana explained to him where he wanted to go and told Nick that it was dangerous to go there because the place was about to be demolished.

“No, buddy pal, no go there, go Broadway show instead Habib make it happen big time.”

Nick explained firmly that it was his job to go where he was asking to be taken and that he would lose it if he didn't do just that. Then, to seal the deal, he slipped Habib an extra twenty which he explained was above and beyond whatever the fare might amount to. But as soon as the cabbie had taken him closer to where he asked to go to Fontana once again felt a terrible sense of dread. The section of town that Akaveesh lived in looked like it was some kind of a war zone. The few people who were visible on the decrepit tumbling down block seemed more ghosts than humans as they flitted from one clump of shadows to another. Looking around, Fontana spotted Akaveesh's building, the worst looking one there. Summoning up all his resolve, he paid Habib and thanked him and then started negotiating his way up the several flights of stairs to the top of the building where his boyhood idol resided. His journey was both dank and dangerous and seemed to take forever because he regularly had to stop and remove obstacles and debris from his path. There was so much dust and so many cobwebs everywhere that Nick doubted that anyone had come this way in a long, long time. Obviously Akaveesh had some other way out of this place and Nick was hopeful that he would share it with him before he had to leave. An exhausting eternity later Nick finally arrived at Dietrich's place and, after dusting himself off as best he could, he knocked loudly at the door and in the process picked up a splinter or two. Even more snail-like time crawled by and then, just as Nick was about to leave, he heard Dietrich's familiar voice tell him, “Come in, it ain't locked.”

Even though the door was unlocked Nick had a terrible time getting it to open as if no one had accomplished that in many a year. When

he did, only lattices of natural light and deep blackness, broken occasionally by strobing shadows, greeted him. There was a stench and an ambiance that was not unlike that of a long unvisited attic or basement and there was something even more ominous than that there, too. Cobwebs, dusty cobwebs bigger and thicker than Nick had ever imagined that they could be, were everywhere, both in places you might expect them to be and worse than that, in places that seemed to defy all reason. Then there was the reeking zoo like stench of excrement, urine and rotten meat which nauseated him but also somehow made his mouth water at the same time. Stranger than any of this was that many of the cobwebs contained shapes that looked bipedal and adult, judging by the outline of them. With great hesitation, Nick reached out with trembling fingers and touched the one nearest him and when he tried to withdraw his hand a large part of the cobweb was still stuck to it and something about it reminded him horribly of his childhood idol Brer Rabbit's experience with the Tar Baby. Not quite being able to see what he had just revealed, he noticed a wall candelabrum nearby him whose tapers were used. He retrieved a disposable lighter from his pocket and lit the candles there. Then he removed the whole fixture from the wall to guide his path.

The face that he saw was mummified but still distinctly identifiable. It belonged to a 1950's Massive comic book writer named Roger Manolete. Few people remembered him these days but Nick, being an extreme expert on all things comic book, not only could tell who he was even in this unrefined state but remembered much about his largely obscured life and times. Back in the early sixties, after pulling a twenty hour shift at Massive Comics, Manolete had vanished on a humid late August evening after first telling his coworkers that he was heading to the subway to finally go home and get some much needed sleep. The usual police channels never did come up with anything useful on the case and so Roger Manolete became another missing person, soon forgotten as the world moved on without him. As Nick strained to remember more about all this, it suddenly dawned on him that the vast majority of Manolete's writing output had been illustrated by none other than the man that Nick had come so far to meet. Not really wanting to, but as if in a dream, Nick found himself unmasking the other cobwebbed bodies there and to a person he recognized them as either comic book professionals or else people who were extreme fans of that same industry. All of them had also vanished

under strange circumstances over the years and they too were sickening shells of their former mortal selves who looked as if they had been drained by some hideous unnatural thing of all of their vital fluids.

Then suddenly the person that Nick had traveled clear across the continent to meet was standing close to him and he wished with all his soul that he was not. The abomination now truly revealed was a nightmare beyond any human's ability to create Equal parts spider and man, its sum total was the worst of both species and all of it was made even more surreal by that voice that sounded like it should be coming out of the counterman at some kosher deli instead of whatever this walking hallucination truly was. Since two of its many arms were those of a man, that explained how it drew to make a living. The only recognizably human thing within sight was its drawing board and artist's work area which resembled so many others that Nick had so far encountered. This incongruity only added to the pulsating lack of all that Nick might have expected to find here.

As it half stumbled forward it rattled on almost casually, "Glad you could come, pal. Sorry about all this, I like you I really do, hell, all these other folks were my friends also before it became necessary for them to become my dinner. In the old days my cartooning enabled me to procure a lot of what I needed to eat by bribing morgue attendants but these days I'm reduced to luring people like you to fill my larder and I feel kind of bad about that but after all a guy's got to eat." He lunged forward crudely which, instead of having the desired effect, sent Nick crashing backwards forcefully through the window he was standing by.

The brittle filthy window gave way beneath Nick's impact. It knocked the wind out of him. He looked one last time at what Dietrich Akaveesh truly was and the very notion of it still did not want to register even on an imagination as wide open and well practiced as his. Plunging helplessly earthward, he suddenly realized with a start that he too was now getting the spider's eye view that Akaveesh had drawn so well and so often based on his hungry jaunts about his grisly business while he made his appointed rounds about town.

The impact with the ground came sooner than expected and yet seemed to take forever. He didn't know exactly what he might have imagined getting pulped was going to feel like but this was far more agonizing than that. Thankfully he lost consciousness seconds afterwards and when next he came to he was in a large New York hospital in intensive

care with round-the-clock nurses and doctors tending him, thanks to his wife's superb health care plan from her day job. At several points during all this he talked to various police officers and NYPD detectives but he was very guarded in what he revealed, not wanting to be labeled some kind of a smart mouth or worse than that, some kind of a lunatic.

Eventually he learned that the unfailingly nice Habib had waited for him and had found him soon after his terrifying nosedive had taken place. The kind hearted man had helped to get the aid that he needed. The two became fast friends in the course of the cabbie's many visits during Nick's convalescence. Eventually Nick was healed enough to carefully fly home but before he did so he prevailed on Habib to take him on a detour to the part of town that had once been the source of his strange quest. As Habib had predicted, en route to the place there was nothing there but dirt and the minor rubble that one usually associates with urban renewal and of course there wasn't any trace of Dietrich Akaveesh. Nick wasn't sure that he wanted there to be any.

As the years passed Nick heard rumors that the old cartoonist was still doing this and that and was still as elusive and as incognito as he ever was but Nick scrupulously avoided any further involvement with him. As hoped for, Nick came to write for the comic books full time and on the side wrote several learned hardbacks about their history but when it came to Akaveesh he always pretended that he didn't know much about him and had never met him in person. The strangest aftermath of all this was that Nick became an extreme victim of phonephobia and would jump a foot whenever one rang. After the voice on the other end of the phone so long ago had turned out not to be human at all and might well do so in the future. He had no desire whatsoever to talk on one. Now that he knew what a spider's voice truly sounded like he never wanted to ever hear one again.



## *Eckleburg's Eyes*

*Ken Goldman*

“... he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.

‘God sees everything...’” - F. Scott Fitzgerald    *The Great Gatsby*

### **(1925) (1) TEMPTATION**

Yelena entered the classroom and the magic began. She wore form fitting jeans fashionably torn near each knee and the soft white flesh of her thighs peeked through long slits of shredded denim, enough of it to break a grown man's heart.

In the moment it took to catch his student's eye, Carl Spector's familiar world existed no more. Yelena Ravinskaya had arrived at the doorstep to womanhood simultaneously with her arrival at Room 215 three weeks earlier. From that first day the student from Kiev sent the man free-falling into a maelstrom of conflicting emotions like a swirling feather caught inside a hurricane. Yelena stood out among the cookie-cutter melange of her peers, a figure in bas-relief in an otherwise one dimensional portrait. The girl seemed surrounded by students whose flesh had turned transparent and whose voices faded into ghostly echoes whenever she walked among them. In the simple act of taking her seat Yelena performed the same miracle daily.

Carl wondered if the seventeen year old had even the remotest awareness of her ability to make his over-wound heart fold over on itself like a smashed piñata.

A disquieting thought had crept into Carl Spector's brain. He had not held a woman in his arms, had not experienced the warm pleasure of skin on skin since his divorce. That nebulous anniversary now closed in on three years. He had eliminated carnal urges from his life the way a dieter eliminates chocolate, denying himself the satisfaction but never forgetting the desire. One day that same poor slob might stuff fists full of Fanny Mays into his face until he had emptied a two pound box.

Twenty years Carl had spent hawking American Lit to the bleary-eyed college bound seniors of Roosevelt High, placing Mr. Spector's

lectures in the by-the-numbers category. He spent the next fifty-three minutes talking up F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic of love and death, *The Great Gatsby*, whose tragic hero dies senselessly and ridiculously for his Daisy Buchanan, a woman-child to whom he means nothing. Spector babbled about dreams symbolized by dream girls, romantic illusions, which according to Gatsby's equally tragic author, so easily turn to rubble and ash. He might have added that smashed illusions were not uncommon for an English teacher who had years earlier visualized for himself a far different destiny than the halls of Franklin Roosevelt High School.

A few students took notes. Most didn't.

Yelena did.

The school teacher no longer gave a rat's ass about the late Jay Gatsby of Fitzgerald's stylish Long Island during the roaring 20's. Instead, Carl Spector's thoughts drifted to the Ukrainian girl seated before him right now in upscale Westbury Connecticut, like Anna Karenina in Nikes. A man could lose himself inside such chocolate brown eyes, the sort of large Bette Davis eyes that Kim Carnes had immortalized in song not long after Yelena Ravinskaya had toddled in diapers.

It seemed a cliché to want so badly what he could not have. But that was not entirely an accurate assessment of the man's personal quandary concerning Yelena. Not if he had read the young student's signals correctly.

Carl Spector wanted what he should not have.

~~~~~

"Mr. Spector?"

Mis-terr Spec-torr?

Carl shifted his attention from the thick stack of student essays on his desk, enough of them to turn any man's brain to fudge. Looking up he almost felt the need to rub his eyes to determine the girl really stood there.

"Mr. Spector, can I talk to you?"

"Sounds serious, Yelena. About your test?"

"It's about Gatsby. I have a question."

"You received an 'A' in the exam, didn't you?"

Termites chewed on Carl's nerve endings as he spoke.

The girl continued without missing a beat. "It isn't about my grade. I'm very happy with that. I have a question about the novel."

"Ask."

Carl managed a semblance of equilibrium, but a soft accented voice inside his brain constructed a far different scenario.

Can I be with you, Mr. Spector? Can I touch you, feel your arms around me? Can I . . . talk to you, Mis-terr Spec-torr . . . ?

"I want to know . . . why does Daisy betray Gatsby? He worships this woman, but she doesn't care that he dies for her. Daisy allows Gatsby to get shot so she can go off somewhere and Charleston with her rich husband."

A sharp observation concerning matters of the heart, particularly for a kid of seventeen, Carl thought.

Just a little kiss? No one will know . . .

No wan weel everr know . . .

The whispers of a dozen fantasy Yelenas taunted Spector's brain. His throat felt sandpapered raw while he emitted Cliff Note thoughts from some blow hole separate from himself.

"Daisy Buchanan is a careless woman who needs the excitement of an affair, so Gatsby's money initially appeals to her. But Jay Gatsby can't see past the illusion of what he thinks is real love because he chooses not to see the truth about Daisy."

"You mean that the woman is such a little bitch?"

. . . sootch a leetle beetch . . .

The expression caught him off guard. Of course, had the girl cursed like a longshoreman the heavy accent would translate whatever she uttered into poetry.

"That's not an entirely fair interpretation of her character, Yelena. Daisy is a beautiful but mindless soap bubble. That's all she can be. But when Gatsby reaches out to her, when he really needs her to be there for him -"

"- the soap bubble pops?"

"That's what soap bubbles do."

They shared smiles.

Sootch a leetle beetch to fock Gats-bee and allow heem to die . . .

Yelena turned serious. She moved nearer as if to share a secret saved only for him, bending closer to his ear. Although his first instinct was

to pull back, Carl didn't.

"Mr. Spector, I know you've been looking at me in class. You're not very good at hiding it, you know. Do you find me pretty?"

He almost smiled at the naïveté of the girl's question, quickly realizing her question had been anything but naïve.

Yelena offered a wide grin, waiting for him to return the favor.

He did.

"It's all right with me, okay?" she added. "I mean, I don't mind that you look at me. I don't mind at all. I kind of like it."

Hesitating, her fingertips touched Carl's cheek. Wavering for a micro-second, he grabbed her hand to pull it away. She must have recognized his vacillation, seeming amused by the man's indecision. He looked toward the doorway, certain that some wag from the faculty had stood there the entire time taking in the full measure of this moment.

"Yelena, you shouldn't . . . You really shouldn't do that."

The insincerity of his words leaked through his voice like hot grease through a paper bag. He knew she detected this. Rediscovering her broad smile the girl walked to the door, turning to face him.

"Some women are *not* soap bubbles, Mr. Spector . . ."

~~~~~

By late October the senior class had moved on to Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea*, but Yelena showed little interest in the grizzled Santiago's struggle with a smelly fish. Obsessed with *Gatsby*, the girl had gleaned meaning from the novel Carl could not fathom. A bright student's passion for a work of literature usually touched him, but he felt uneasy about Yelena's fixation with it as her bible. Weeks after he had exhausted his lesson plans on Fitzgerald's narrative she remained after school to present him with yet another cryptic question.

Yelena wanted to know about the eyes of Doctor Eckleburg.

T.J. Eckleburg had been among Fitzgerald's more enigmatic symbols, a large decaying billboard advertisement portraying a pair of eyes peering through yellow-lensed eyeglasses. The weather-beaten sign overlooked the fictional poverty stricken Valley of Ashes like a harbinger sitting in weary judgment of all who passed beneath it. As a somewhat tacky existential metaphor implying God does not care to get involved, the

billboard promoting the good doctor's services for the vision-impaired seemed to belong more properly inside the pages of a Stephen King novel.

"Eckleburg is God, Yelena. A disinterested God probably. It's symbolism, open to interpretation. Authors are pretty tight-lipped about what they mean figuratively. It's like explaining a joke."

"But Eckleburg is just a billboard in the book, just a picture of a man's eyes with glasses on a sign which is falling apart."

"That's how literary symbols work. The sign watches every character and sees whatever sins they commit. Adultery, murder, fun stuff like that."

Yelena took a moment to let her teacher's words sink in, weighing them before she spoke.

"But the man in the sign, that Doctor Eckleburg. He wears glasses. How can God judge what he cannot see clearly?"

A good question and of course the very point Fitzgerald's complex symbol had raised. Eckleburg presented a theological paradox more plausibly scrutinized by Jean-Paul Sartre than a kid whose adolescent counterparts listened to Nine Inch Nails.

"Maybe Fitzgerald's version of God doesn't care if what he sees is a sin. Or maybe he's just too weary with the troubles he sees to care. In Jay Gatsby's milieu the rich folks always carry a 'Get Out of Jail Free' card. Money buys power, and sometimes even God looks the other way, or plays blind, deaf, and dumb. Just don't tell anyone you heard it here."

"Then the author is saying there is no punishment? God is not pissed off?"

The girl had done it again, posed yet another metaphysical conundrum with no simple answer when dissected by the likes of Descartes or Camus, let alone Carl Spector.

God is good. God is powerful. Evil exists.

Go figure.

"Sin sometimes is its own reward, Yelena. Some writers believe that God doesn't care who sins. Others even question God's existence. Some call that outlook cynical. Others say it's realistic."

Yelena considered this too. Wrinkling her brow, the girl's concentration showed in the inverted "V" in the fleshy fold above the bridge of her nose. She leaned toward Carl as if she had solved a

challenging riddle and had become quite pleased with herself. She locked eyes with his, her breath warm on his face.

“And you, Mr. Spector? What do you say?”

Tell me, Mis-terr Spec-torr . . .

She had smashed the barricades that stood between teacher and student, adult and adolescent. Having shared intellectual intimacies, it no longer seemed such a great leap for Carl to share the emotional ones. He moved his face closer to hers, so close their foreheads nearly touched as he shattered that last barrier completely, the one he had constructed himself.

“I say Doctor Eckleburg doesn’t know shit from Sheboygan.”

When he touched her hand an electric current passed between them so powerful Carl felt the tingle in his fingertips. He had opened a private portal and invited the girl to have a look within.

Yelena recognized her cue. She walked to the doorway, scanning the hall outside Room 215. Satisfied, she closed the door twisting its knob to make certain it had locked, then snapped off the overhead lights. Returning to Carl’s desk, saying nothing, she placed her arms firmly around the back of his neck, straddling his lap. He did not push her away. Encouraged, she slid along his thighs to pull her body closer to his. Carl arched his back, closing his eyes. She leaned forward, her mouth seeking his.

Her hand slid slowly up his leg.

“Then a nearsighted God won’t see me when I do *this* . . .”

## **(2) TRANSGRESSION**

Spector found the presence of mind to get them both out of there fast. Roosevelt’s afternoon cleaning staff carried keys to his classroom and Charlene was due to wax floors some time during the week. More incriminating were the windows of 215 that faced the west wing of the building. Anyone on the opposite side could easily follow the extra-curricular activities conducted in his classroom after school hours.

What remained of Carl’s rationality flew south the moment the girl entered his Civic. Yelena knew of an old church yard, the Roman Catholic Cathedral of All Saints that had burned down in the 70’s, some abandoned patch of weeds and cobbled stones in Southbury miles past the tattered

Bullet Hill Schoolhouse. Forty minutes later Carl turned off U.S. 6 and followed a nameless dirt path for ten more minutes without having the slightest notion of where he was.

He would be baking dog-turd pizzas in Hell for this one, kissing his soul and possibly his job good-bye the moment he reached for her. The Westbury School Board would be first in line to book his reservation in the Purgatory Hilton.

Carl exchanged no words with Yelena and for fifteen minutes the two sat inside his car in awkward silence not even touching. Outside a light drizzle began and dark thunderheads were forming.

She slid closer to him. He kissed her for a long time and held her in the cold stillness of the compact before Yelena climbed into the rear seat and waited for him with her jeans already unzipped. He tugged them off. Except for a little whimper of pain the girl did not utter a single word when he entered her.

Afterwards they huddled together in the narrow confines of the Civic, sporadic sheets of rain pelting the roof. With her clothing strewn on all sides, she had begun to shiver. Carl wrapped his coat around the girl, and buttoning it he drew her closer. Yelena's aggressiveness had exhausted itself and in its place sat a bashful child. This silence felt different, more tense, broken only by dull grumbles of distant thunder.

"I adore you," she finally said because it seemed the thing to say.

The words seemed rehearsed and ridiculous, their delivery nullified by the girl's sudden re-entry to real life. Carl knew their fumbling back seat encounter fell short of whatever illusion Yelena had fashioned for her first time spent with him. There was no way reality could have ever lived up to that illusion. He would have been foolish to think it could.

Soap bubbles pop. It's what soap bubbles do.

Clouds of black wool drifted directly above them, catching the girl's attention as he held her.

"I'd like to get one of those clouds and put you in it so I can push you around."

"You can't fool me," Carl said. "That's a line Daisy says to Gatsby."

Yelena frowned as if he had caught her cheating in an exam.

"Daisy was insincere in her affections, Mr. Spector. I'm not."

She looked away from him, her eyes drifting to the church yard. A sudden electric bolt seemed to pass through her with such force Carl flinched too.

Yelena's face went pale. Something had caught her attention, something in the rain storm that disturbed her enough to choke on her words. She pointed instead.

Carl saw nothing.

"What? Where?"

She kept her voice low as if afraid someone might hear.

"There. The statue. Right next to us. I didn't notice it when we arrived. My mind was on other things, you know?"

A large dripping sculpture of Jesus on the cross loomed over the driver's side of the Civic, a voyeuristic deity in cracked white marble staring silently downward at them. A considerable section of Christ's face had chipped off around the nose, but the Nazarene's eyes remained intact. They were open. Wide open.

Carl almost chuckled at his own momentary panic. He half expected Yelena to have pointed out some dour nun with umbrella in hand risking a thorough soaking to view her savior enduring his crucifixion in the rain, someone who might have questioned what a middle aged man was doing parked at the cathedral with a teenage girl half his age.

"You have a sudden urge to pray to a fifteen foot slab of cracked rock?"

"He was watching us the whole time, Mr. Spector. I've never done anything like this before and Jesus was right there-" Yelena pulled away from him as if having been discovered doing something so completely reprehensible she had to hide her face. She was trembling like a child about to receive a severe beating. "He knows what we've done. He's right there and he saw every bit of it!"

Carl struggled to keep his perspective. He had excavated some serious guilt-laden terror from deep within the girl's psyche, some foul sludge mucking up the shadowy corners of her soul. If she were having second thoughts about the afternoon's activities he knew he was in for a much rougher ride than she had just given him in the back seat.

"It's a statue, Yelena. Just an old marble statue that's falling apart. Jesus has seen much better days."



Lost among the shards of her annihilated Catholicism the girl seemed not to hear him. Instead, she struggled to pull completely away as if she had discovered he carried a disease, moving as far from Spector as the small car allowed. The inverted ‘V’ appeared so deeply embedded above her brow it seemed some butcher had sliced her flesh with a dull knife. She had measured her moral uncertainty with an imperfect slide rule and penitence seemed her only out. Confession would follow, and this would not bode well for the man who had robbed the girl of her virtue in Christ’s own back yard.

“Doctor Eckleburg was just a decayed billboard! How is a statue any different? God *does* see!”

“Yelena, this is crazy. Listen to me-”

“Liar! Liar!”

Shrieking, she hammered his chest with balled fists. Sobs became screams. Thick trails of tears soaked her face, and she shook as if palsied.

Carl felt the stirrings of cold panic. He begged her to stop, knowing she wouldn’t, certain that her shrieks would continue even after he dropped her off. That meant someone might ask some pretty embarrassing questions.

Grabbing the girl’s hands, he held them clamped together, but Yelena had worked herself into such a frenzy she managed to break free. She scratched at his face like an angry cat, tearing a thick streak into the flesh of his cheek. The slash turned pink, then bubbled with blood. He slapped her, hoping to quiet her. This made her scream louder.

Kicking at the door, she yanked the handle and spilled out of the car. She got to her feet and ran only a few yards before slipping on the rain-soaked cobblestones.

“Yelena, you’ve got nothing on under that coat! If someone sees you-”

She bolted from him without looking back.

Carl ran through the downpour and caught up with her, grabbing her arm. When she pulled herself free he went after her again, this time bringing her down with a full hammerlock and dragging her back toward the car. Soaked, the girl still kicked and screamed, forcing him to cover her mouth. She would not stop struggling against him. He yanked harder, the curve of his elbow hooked tightly across her throat, his free hand firm

against her mouth to quiet her. He wanted to talk, to reason with her. He could fix this.

He had to fix this.

She bit his hand, but already she had grown too exhausted to break skin. Carl reacted instinctively more from anger than pain, twisting the girl's delicate neck hard against his chest to shut her mouth before some fool of a Samaritan came running to ruin his life. He heard a sickening crack that reminded him of rotted wood.

It ended in that instant. The girl went limp as if a power cord were cut, lolling backwards against him, her eyes two bulging aggie marbles staring insipidly into space. Carl released his hold and she slid from his arms, thumping to the wet cobblestones. Yelena lay twisted and still, drenched in the rain with arms outstretched at the feet of the statue of Jesus as if in her final act of contrition.

Tearing his fingers through the strands of wet hair dripping into his eyes, a dull semblance of Carl's rationality returned, enough to make his stomach churn with nausea. He fell to his knees, muttering to the corpse crumpled before him like a child's ruined toy.

*"Oh God, I'm sorry. I never wanted to hurt you, Yelena. I swear to God I never meant to -"*

God.

Sorry.

Kneeling in the shadow of the fractured statue Carl looked up at the crucified figure emerging above him like an avenging angel.

The Westbury School District 11 W. Maple Thorn Rd. Westbury,  
Connecticut Attention: Mr. Herman Weisenthal Superintendent of  
Schools November 17, 1998

Dear Mr. Weisenthal,

I am requesting a temporary leave of absence for the remainder of the school year, effective immediately. I have arranged with my Department Chairman, Ms. Loretta DeMarco, to return all materials and grade records necessary for the smooth transition of my classes to another instructor.

Sincerely, Carl Spector

### (3) REVELATION

*“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned . . .”* As a stranger to the confessional Carl Spector felt ridiculous uttering such a cliché. So much about religion belonged to that category. The cramped and musty chamber inside which he sat did nothing to dispel his religious preconceptions. “Did I say that correctly?”

“How long has it been since your last confession?”

“I’ve never been. I’m not Catholic.”

Fully expecting the priest’s moment of bewilderment, Carl waited him out.

“Do you wish to confess?”

The fragile voice behind the dark screen indicated the priest was elderly. His words, disembodied and bled of passion, verified the way this puzzling ritual worked. You don’t piss off a man of God. The clergyman held his emotions in abeyance because anything less than benign judgment might send the guilt-ridden fleeing for the exit.

Fleeing like Yelena had . . .

“Been driving around for hours looking for this place. It’s a good three miles from the muddy tow path that took me here. This church is the closest to the old Saints Cathedral, so it seemed the appropriate spot. I didn’t see a billboard outside.”

“This is The Church of the Nazarene,” the priest explained. “Our billboard was destroyed many years ago during a rain storm. We absorbed the remaining All Saints clergy after the cathedral burned in 1977.”

“Ruined billboards and rain storms. All the more appropriate,” Carl said.

The priest gave no response to the non-sequitur and Carl had the sensation of speaking to himself. But that was probably the idea behind this free-association vomiting of his soul.

*Welcome sinners. Come binge and purge.*

“It wasn’t easy for me to make this visit. I kept putting it off for over two years, hoping that my attending the grave site might be enough. But it wasn’t . . . I killed someone, Father. A young woman.”

And there it was, laid out on the table like a busted poker hand upon which he had gambled everything. Having said the words Carl

expected at least a gasp from the old man. Instead he responded with a long pause from behind the screen. The thick silence lingered like a foul dust.

“Go on,” the priest finally said as if Carl had commented on the weather.

“I’m more the skeptic than the agnostic when it comes to my religious convictions, Father. Do you believe a cynic can believe in God?”

A trick question, but this time the priest had a ready answer.

“I think anyone can believe in God.”

“Then maybe anyone can believe in miracles too, because I can’t imagine any other explanation for what’s happened to me . . . or rather, for what hasn’t happened. I haven’t a criminal mind, Father. I left enough evidence to dispatch an army of investigators to my door. Fingerprints, my skin under her fingernails . . . hell, I did everything but sign my signature to the girl’s corpse. But no one made accusations. The police asked me no questions, so naturally I received no punishment. Not so much as a slapped wrist.”

Silence now from the other side of the screen.

“Of course, I never meant to kill her, Father. But do you want to know the really ironic part? After an hour in my back seat the girl died terrified, convinced she would suffer the moral consequences of her sin. And here I am living proof that there are no moral consequences for a sin no one has seen. I’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop, expecting a kick in my face. So far I’m still waiting. I don’t think it’s going to happen.”

The priest moved closer to the black screen mesh between them, the shadows of his cell revealing a ghostly outline of the old man’s face.

“You believe there are no moral consequences, yet you came here to confess?”

“It’s because I think of that young woman sometimes. Less than I did earlier, although a few residual demons are still hanging in there. I just needed to tell someone. That’s why I came.”

I’m sorry, Yelena. I never wanted to hurt you.

“Perhaps those demons are your moral consequences?”

Carl considered this.

“Maybe they were at first. But if self-condemnation is my only punishment, it seems a pretty lame one to me.”

“Yet you still came, apparently of your own free will?”

Free will. There was a laugh. Where was his free will two years earlier when he was a man possessed by some commandeering demon, his hormones aching for Yelena in spite of everything sane and rational? Where was Yelena's when her enraged God jealously watched her every move? What free will did anyone really have while they did their idiotic little dance on this planet? No, free will had not brought him here, no more than a puppet could do the funky chicken independent of the man pulling the strings.

A blind man pulling the strings . . .

Our omnipotent yet blind Father Who Art in Heaven . . .

God is Good. God is powerful. Evil Exists.

Evil exists, all right. In spades.

I'm sorry, Yelena. I'm so sorry . . .

Such thoughts were like amusement park bumper cars colliding inside the mad carnival of his brain. His head throbbing, Carl wanted this ride to end.

I have seen the truth and it makes no sense . . .

He leaned on his elbows closer to the screen. Looking through it he almost laughed out loud at what he saw.

"You wear glasses, Father. Bifocals, I'll bet. I can't quite see--"

"You came to confess and I've heard your confession. There's going to be much difficult work ahead for you."

"That's it? What kind of contrition is this? No threats of fire and brimstone? No Hail Marys to atone for my sins? No diddling with the beads?"

"No."

The priest's single word felt like a poor punchline to a bad joke, but possibly Carl had expected too much. Wrapping his coat around him, a sudden thought came like an epiphany.

"I think I've learned something today, Father. You're right. I'm not certain what brought me here. Maybe I was searching for some theological explanation for what I've done and where it fits within the great scheme of things. Sometimes you've got to peel away the layers of dogma to get to that truth. But finally discovering it is like chancing upon a new religion waiting for you to see it born. Maybe I've known all along who God really is and what he's all about. Maybe old Yahweh was just biding his time all these years realizing that someday I would discover his cosmic deception,

that he looks pretty good from a distance but examine him up close and the seams of his costume show.”

“God is many things to many people. But God is always the truth, the only truth. You and I have just begun to-”

Carl buttoned his coat, grinning so widely at the elderly priest’s dementia that his gums showed. The answer seemed clearer now. If there were a kingdom of Heaven then his visit with the old guy had probably secured him a gate pass. But he no longer wanted to go.

“God is the truth, yes indeed. You got that much right, Father. And I’ll take it one step further. I’ll tell you just what that truth is. Damn, I feel like I’ve been born again, amen and hallelujah! Are you listening? I’ll share the facts about a God who sees nothing and therefore who judges nothing, a God who is as blind as a bat just like you.”

The priest’s breathing had grown heavy and through the screen’s dark mesh Carl saw a ghostlike gleam in the old man’s eyes. The elder had moved closer, his mouth practically touching the thin barrier so that he could share his response. The secretive gesture caused Carl to move closer also, and with the stench of the old man’s breath hot in his nostrils suddenly he found that his own breathing had grown heavy.

. . . because through the charcoal netting Carl saw the old priest smiling too, smiling a wide and toothy grin right back at him even while he whispered from his place in the shadows . . .

“And what truth is that, Mr. Spector? That God is Doctor T.J. Eckleburg?”

#### **(4) SALVATION**

1.

“The test of the first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

#### **-- F. Scott Fitzgerald    The Crack-Up (1936)**

“This book sucks,” Carl overheard one of his students mention to his seat mate shortly before class began. Looking up from his roll, Spector stared at the kid with the tennis ball haircut seated in the same chair Yelena Ravinskaya had once occupied.

“‘Gatsby’ sucks, you mean?” He leaned forward and grinned so disarmingly that the kid involuntarily returned his teacher’s smile. “And just why is that, Mike?”

The boy’s eyes took on the expression of a deer suddenly caught in the headlights of an on-coming truck. Still, the teacher’s smile seemed genuine enough not to contain anything too dangerous concealed behind it.

“It’s boring, Mr. Spector. A bunch of people sitting around yammering that there’s nothing to do, then a whole page spent describing some stupid billboard. I mean, who cares, you know?”

“Uh huh,” Spector said, considering this, then added for the entire class, “But isn’t literature supposed to have something to say to us, some universal message from which we’re meant to take our own meaning?”

The student mumbled to his friend in the ritualistic mouth-full-of-marbles manner of every high school kid, “The meaning I take from this book is that it sucks.” The outspoken Michael Carliner surely knew that his teacher had heard him. The kid just didn’t much care.

And maybe there was some meaning to be taken from that too . . .

“Suppose the billboard was God?” Spector added. “Suppose God, the same God who watched over you, really didn’t care about you? Suppose you could just act as if God never really existed and it made no difference at all? That doesn’t hold any meaning for you?” Spector’s eyes scanned the young faces before him. “It doesn’t say anything to any of you? Don’t you ever think about things like this?”

A girl in the back giggled. Another had been too busy applying her make-up to have heard the question. Mike Carliner’s smile now seemed to smear across his entire face.

“Mike’s right, Mr. Spector,” the boy seated next to Carliner finally said. “This book is pretty boring.”

Spector paused to take this in. He was not really surprised that his class felt this way. Nor was he surprised at his own reaction.

“And how many others would agree with this?” he asked. There was no response, and he knew why. “Come on. It’s not a trick question. How many of you feel *The Great Gatsby* is too boring to read. Hands?”

The class’ response was almost unanimous except for the pretty dark haired girl seated all the way in the back of the room. But Carl did not really want to know about her thoughts on the matter.

Instead Carl Spector collected every one of his students' copies of *The Great Gatsby* that same minute.



## **A Crimson Shade of Rage**

*Patricia Anabel*

A gloomy, dark house  
No one is ever there  
Just some lost souls for whom  
Nobody does care.

A muted shuffle of feet  
Old floorboard's nebulous squeak  
A displaced, dispossessed freak  
Reeks of an infinite defeat.

A crimson haze of ire  
Is feeding your evil fire  
A temper in need of release  
Tonight a life will expire.

You raise a knife to the light  
See its shiny blade  
Then disperse and go to hide  
Plunge into the dark shade.

Over your eyes you pull the hood  
Hide your demon face  
Up to its handle made from wood  
You drive in the knife with grace.

A silver kiss from the Moon  
He inhales his last breath  
It will be over very soon  
Your release in his death.

## Storage

*Thomas M. Malafarina*

“What an ungodly time of the evening to visit a storage locker!” Ryan thought, reprimanding himself for the poor timing, yet knowing he had little choice because of his hectic schedule. He had to stop whenever he could and unfortunately that usually meant doing so in the evening after a long and tiring day at the office. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the storage facility was on the road he traveled as part of his daily commute.

He realized it was ridiculous for him to feel so uneasy about the simple task of stopping by for ten minutes to retrieve whatever his wife might ask him to pick up. Yet every time he had to do it he felt like something about the place was wrong. Tonight things felt exceptionally wrong. He couldn’t help but notice how it seemed to be getting prematurely dark and how he was the only person in the facility. Ryan sat in his car for a few minutes with the engine running, looking out through the windshield, taking in the seemingly endless shadowed rows of storage units stretching out before him. The sight reminded him of a time when he was in junior high school art class and they were studying the concept of perspective. He and his classmates had been required to draw railroad tracks starting wide at the closest point and tapering forward until they joined at the horizon line. This was how the rows of storage units in the *Store More Storage Facility* now looked to him. They appeared to go on forever.

Even in the daylight, Ryan hated the place and detested the very idea and so-called need for such a facility. Ryan was only using his storage shed on a temporary basis because he had no choice. He and his wife Julie were between homes. They had sold their small two-bedroom rancher and were waiting to move into a much larger four-bedroom split level which they were having custom built. Unfortunately, the contractor had run into a few snags and the build was taking longer than he had promised. As a result they were forced to put their possessions in storage. Because he was responsible for their inconvenience, the builder had agreed to pay the cost of the apartment and the storage unit as well as their moving expenses. All things considered, Ryan felt it was about the best solution for a bad situation.

But that did little to make up for the inconvenience he and Julie were facing. What bugged him most about the storage facility was he suspected that many if not most of the hundreds of units in the place were not just temporary in nature like his, but were in reality used by people who simply had too many possessions and couldn't bear to part with them. So the people voluntarily forked out the one hundred or more dollars every month for the sole purpose of storing tons of what Ryan thought of as garbage; most of which should be decomposing in landfill somewhere or should have been chopped up at a recycling facility. He couldn't understand why people insisted on hanging on to worthless junk, let alone why they would want to pay a premium to store it.

He had watched a few episodes of the A & E Channel reality show *Storage Wars*, where people competed to get the best deals hidden in unclaimed storage lockers. He couldn't comprehend earning a living bidding on stuff no one really wanted anyway. But he supposed the old adage "one man's trash is another man's treasure" must be correct. He also on occasion stumbled onto A & E's show *Hoarders* which he preferred not to watch as it really bothered him.

Yet if he accidentally channel-surfed onto the program, he couldn't help but watch. It was like a train wreck. Every time he saw an episode, he was at first mesmerized, then revolted, then he was usually motivated to immediately choose one of his closets, clean it out and trash everything he felt they didn't need. Both he and his wife detested the idea of having too many material possessions.

So it went against his grain to be forced by circumstances beyond his control into this Mecca of human refuse, especially at night. Ryan stared out through the windshield, feeling like there was something particularly wrong with this place that went beyond his simple dislike for it. He had stopped by to pick up a few kitchen items which Julie hadn't originally thought she would need for a while, but now discovered she did. Luckily he had planned ahead, had packed the shed in a logical fashion and knew the boxes with the kitchen supplies were close to the front and could be easily accessed. That was just the way he wanted it. The sooner he got out of this extremely uncomfortable place, the better.

Ryan stepped out of his sedan with his flashlight at the ready and left the motor running as he always did whenever he arrived at the shed at night. He left his driver's door open too, just in case he needed to get back

inside quickly. Ryan wasn't typically prone to such feelings of apprehension or irrational fear but there was just something about the place this night which seemed even stranger than normal. The moon, although full and bright had suddenly become hidden by a thick layer of clouds. "Funny," Ryan thought. He hadn't heard any forecast of inclement weather. The lone security light mounted on a rickety pole more than fifty feet from his shed, was flickering weakly doing little to provide necessary illumination.

He walked slowly toward the roll-up door of his unit, feeling strangely as if someone was watching him from the shadows. He looked around while squinting in a feeble attempt to see through the growing gloom. Maybe he was imagining the sensation or perhaps the security camera was working after all. It stood high on the same pole as the failing light; its single eye tilted downward moving back and forth in a semicircle like a robotic sentry. Despite its appearance, Ryan still didn't believe the thing was functional.

He recalled the day he and the moving van arrived with his furniture and he had stopped at the front office to meet with the owner. The man sat behind the front desk like an emperor ruling over all he surveyed. Ryan later learned the owner was actually his builder's brother-in-law. He was one of those disheveled people who Ryan just naturally took an instant dislike to. He was an overweight, greasy, sweating hog of a man in a pair of oversized plaid shorts and a stained yellowed wife-beater. His head was bald save for a white fringe which was too long and hung over his ears. There were long thatches of gnarly white hair, which made it difficult to determine where his head hair ended and his ear hair began. Likewise the man's shoulders were covered with cotton-candy like tumbleweeds of white hair which matched his thick white furry arms as well as the tufts which protruded from his armpits and chest like silky white ornamental grass.

Ryan also felt certain that hygiene was as foreign a concept to the man as reading a magazine which might not contain pictures of naked women. This thought was substantiated by the massive collapsing piles of such pornography which covered his filthy desk.

Yes, Ryan was quite certain the camera was a fake and the place had no any real security; save for the chain link fence surrounding it, the card access at the entrance gate and the keys to the padlock for his shed. Ryan realized suddenly that if some maniac ever broke into the place and decided to attack him, his chances of getting any help from that security

camera were nil. He held the handle of his flashlight tighter, holding its meager plastic body pointlessly as if it were a weapon of some real substance.

As Ryan bent to insert his key into the lock securing the roll-up garage door, he heard a sound which seemed to come from one of the lockers several units to the right. He stood upright, waiting to determine if he could hear the noise again. It had been a strange sound, sort of like a whimper or a faint sigh or maybe even a moan. Although he had been certain he had heard something, all seemed to be silent now. The strange sound did nothing to help his already active imagination or his discomfort, it only made him want to get his stuff and leave even more quickly than before.

He returned to his task and just as he removed the padlock from its hasp he heard the whimpering again, followed by a faint thumping sound. He immediately imagined the sound to be like that someone would make if they had weakly bumped against one of the metal walls surrounding the storage unit.

“Hello?” Ryan asked into the darkness, which seemed to be getting more intense by the minute. He also noticed that a light mist had begun to creep slowly along the ground, working its way through the cross ways between the banks of storage units like a translucent grey serpent. He listened for another minute then, hearing no other sounds, started to turn back toward his shed. The place was really getting under his skin now, despite the knowledge that his discomfort was irrational. Ryan realized he had to pull himself together. He stood silently and took a deep cleansing breath, which really did make him feel much better. Then he heard the thump again.

Against his better judgment, Ryan slowly began to walk down along the rows of locked storage sheds toward the location of the sound, which regrettably took him further away from the security pole and deeper into the gloom. He trained his flashlight on the doors of the sheds, stopping at each one and listening for the sounds again. Each time he stopped he would look back longingly toward his car which was still sitting idling, with the driver’s door open. Ryan cursed himself for not turning on his headlights and was about to go back and do so when he heard the sound again. It appeared to be coming from the next unit down.

He focused his flashlight on the door handle and noticed to his surprise there was no padlock in the hasp. He looked around, hoping to possibly see the headlights from some other tenant coming by, but he found he was still alone. For a moment Ryan considered calling 911 but realized how foolish he would seem trying to explain to the police how he heard a strange noise coming from a locker which wasn't his. They would likely become suspicious and possibly accuse him of trying to break into someone else's shed. He looked back at the spot where the security camera should be and realized even if it were working; the light was so dim where he now stood no one would be able to see him anyway. Then he heard a whimper and a light thump once again. It was definitely coming from the locker where he now stood.

Mustering all of his courage Ryan bent down, grabbed the door handle and attempted to open the garage door. It was surprisingly heavier than the door on his own unit so he had to set down his flashlight in order to lift it. He slowly raised the door, opening the shed fully. Unfortunately, with the amount of darkness and mist surrounding him, he was unable to see clearly but from what he could tell it looked like any other cluttered storage unit; just a ten-by-ten metal building filled with an assortment of furniture and boxes piled inside. Then once again he heard a slight moaning sound which seemed to be coming from deep inside.

Ryan reached down and picked up his flashlight. As he stood he thought he saw something moving out of the corner of his eye, off to his right. He pointed his flashlight in that direction but saw nothing but the strange mist which had now seemed to have taken on the appearance of a thick fog. He looked back to check on his car and could barely make it out in the thickening atmosphere; he could see the faint glow of his dome light but the car and the open door were no longer visible.

This was all getting too strange for Ryan to deal with. He had just made up his mind to turn and head back to his car when he heard the light thumping sound again. He whirled and focused his light on the inside of the open shed door.

"What the!" Ryan exclaimed, when to his amazement he realized that what he originally thought was a storage unit full of someone's various belongings was nothing more than some sort of curtain; a painting or tapestry designed to replicate the inside of a storage shed. Ryan gently pressed against the surface of the tapestry and felt it move inward until it

bumped against something solid behind it. At the same time he heard the faint moan once again. Then he heard a whispering raspy voice pleading “Help me... please... help me.”

Ryan grabbed the right side of the curtain-like tapestry and quickly pulled it back while training his flashlight inside the shed. What he saw caused his stomach to clench with disgust and made him freeze in uncontrollable terror. He took in the entire ungodly spectacle of what was inside the storage unit in one unbearable glance.

Behind the curtain wall was what could only be described as some poor soul’s Hell on earth. There was a structure in the center of the room; a rack of sorts made from thick heavy pipe welded together to form a giant rectangular framework. Hanging from the rack was the body of a young man, not much older than Ryan. His hands, neck and feet were manacled with heavy rusted metal and chain, secured with padlocks and welded to the heavy framework.

There was a complex network of plastic tubing encircling him with dozens if not hundreds of tubes and needles intravenously connected to the man. Some of the tubes were clear and seemed to be feeding him from a bag filled with a transparent clear fluid, which was positioned high on a stainless steel pole. Ryan suspected this device might be supplying with what was likely the minimal amount of nutrients necessary to sustain life. There were also thicker tubes coming in and out of the man’s abdomen which gave Ryan the impression they might too be some sort of feeding mechanism. At the same time plastic tubes red with fluid were leading from the man’s body to a bag on a hook near the man’s feet.

“Blood.” Ryan said in a soft voice. Then he thought “This man is being force-fed and kept barely alive with some type of I-V drip and feeding tubes while at the same time his blood is being slowly drained from his body.” Then a single word of understanding popped into Ryan’s mind, “Harvested.” And he realized he was probably correct. This young man’s blood was being produced and harvested for some reason. “But why?” he wondered. “For what purpose?”

Ryan knew the need for certain types of blood was often critical, but he could not imagine the value of any blood type being sufficiently high enough to warrant someone doing something so rash. Then he wondered if perhaps the man were being kept alive so someone could eventually harvest

his organs, one at a time. That certainly would bring in a lot more money than selling blood. Yet that too didn't seem quite correct.

The chained young man weakly attempted to raise his head, his hooded red-rimmed eyes scarcely able to focus. "Hel... help me..." he managed to squeak out through dried, cracked and bloody lips.

Ryan suddenly snapped out of the strange trance which had overtaken him and stammered, "Wa... what happened to you? Who... who did this?"

"Help... please." The man said weakly. "Get... help... now... please." Ryan took out his cell phone and looked reassuringly at the wretched man. "Look... see... I have a cell phone... I can call for help."

The man's eyes opened wide in terror staring past Ryan at something he was seeing behind him. His split lips seemed to be forming some silent word which Ryan could not discern. The man appeared to be mouthing the word NO.

Ryan felt a cold chill creep like a centipede down the center of his spine as the hairs on the back of his neck tingled with some primal warning of imminent danger. Still holding his cell phone tightly in his hands, he turned slowly to confront whoever waited behind him. At first he saw nothing but the darkness and the ever-thickening fog, then a silhouette began to emerge from the mist coming ever closer and finally taking shape.

Ryan was frozen in terror, unsure if what he was seeing was real or some strange trick of the light. He was not even sure he could possibly be seeing what he thought he was seeing. There was someone or more accurately, something standing in the gloom, partially illuminated by the glow of his flashlight which was pointing down toward the ground. He was unsure if it was a man, an animal or some horrible twisted mutation between human and beast.

It stood about seven feet tall, was shoeless and shirtless but wore pants that appeared to be faded jeans which were ripped and tattered. The thing's chest was massive, hairy, muscular and was covered with crosshatches of thick ropy scar tissue as if the result of poorly healed lacerations. Looking down the muscular arms to the creature's hands, Ryan could see long gnarled fingers with claw-like yellowed fingernails.

But the real horror came when Ryan lifted his flashlight and stared at the creature's hideous face. It was humanoid, but far from human, with an oversized mouth filled with long needle like teeth all of which appeared to



be stained crimson with blood. Its nose was more of a snout than a nose; pig-like in appearance with dark flaring nostrils from which deep plumes of air now pushed through the fog in cadence with its heavy breathing. The smell of the thing was incredibly horrid, as foul as that of a barn-yard animal but with more woodsy, savage and feral stink combined with a deeper stench of rotten meat.

Then Ryan looked into the creature's inhuman eyes, which were blacker than black and in which Ryan not only saw a surprising intelligence, but something much worse; a type of hunger the likes of which he could never hope to fully comprehend. From behind the creature an enormous set of leathery wings opened and blocked any remaining moonlight, casting Ryan into total darkness.

Ryan's trembling fingers reached for the 9-1-1 buttons on his cell phone although he knew the gesture would likely be futile. Even he were luckily enough to hit the correct buttons and an army of policemen miraculously showed up, Ryan suspected they would be of little use against such a hellish beast. The word "hellish" sounded right to him because truly no such abomination of unimaginable horror could possibly have come from anywhere but Hell. The cell phone was knocked from Ryan's hand as he felt sharp claws scrape deep furrows across his forearm.

The agony which exploded in his arm was instantaneous and when he opened his mouth to scream he realized not only would he not escape but he was unable to move. He understood immediately his paralysis was not just from terror but that the creature's claws must have sent some fast-acting paralytic toxin into his blood stream, because he could no longer feel the pain in his hand.

A massive clawed hand wrapped around Ryan's throat, cutting off his air supply. The creature's hideous face was now just a few foul smelling inches from Ryan's own; its stench was overwhelming. The thing's eyes grew wide with excitement and seemed to glow with anticipation as Ryan's own vision blurred then finally went black.

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"Hell if I know what happened," the overweight sleazy owner of the storage facility said to the investigating police officer. "The guy who you said owns

this car is one of my renters, all right. That's his locker right there. But I've no idea where he might be."

The officer looked up at the security camera in the distance and asked, "Does that thing work?"

"Well... no not really," the man said sheepishly, "In fact, it's not even a real camera. It's one of those decoy things that moves back and forth but really don't film anything. According to local code I'm not required to have real cameras inside the complex but I figured the decoy might do a good job of helping to keep honest people honest."

"You do advertise security camera monitoring. Isn't that right?" the officer inquired.

The man hesitated for a moment then said "Sort of, but not really. I do have a camera that does work out at the main gate. It monitors everyone coming in and going out. You can check the footage out front. But I already did. After this guy arrived last night no one came in or out of here until I arrived early this morning. I drove around and did my normal morning rounds and then I found the car. I called you folks. The car was sitting with the door open and the motor still running just like it is now."

As if on cue, the car sputtered, then the engine died. "Must have run out of gas," the man suggested, looking at the cop who silently nodded his agreement.

"Well," the policeman said, "we had a call this morning from this guy's wife saying he never came home last night. She said she called his cell phone repeatedly but he never answered. She said that was unlike him, so she became worried and called us."

The greasy man replied, "Yes, it's all so strange. Stuff like this never happened in my storage facility before."

The officer would check to make sure what the owner was saying was true and although he thought the man to be less than completely honest in his business dealings, he appeared to be telling the truth regarding this particular situation.

"I'm going to look around a bit more then call a tow truck to haul this car to the impound lot. I assume you will be here to let them in when they arrive?"

"Not a problem, officer," the owner said. "Whatever you need."

The policeman walked slowly up and down the aisle looking for any signs which might shine some light on this mysterious disappearance.

At one point he thought he heard a faint and distant sound like a moan, but when he saw a cluster of leaves blowing down the aisle, he realized it must have been the wind.

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Ryan slowly opened his eyes to complete darkness. He felt pain throughout his body; in his legs, arms and even his neck. He tried to move and realized he couldn't. He didn't know if he was still paralyzed or simply too weak to use his body. Even trying to think seemed to exhaust him. He felt something hard, like metal around his neck, wrists and ankles and knew, with horror, he was manacled. He wanted to rattle the chains and to cry out for help but he couldn't. It was like he was trying to move someone else's body with his own mind.

He suddenly recalled the image of the chained man in the storage shed and the horrifying winged creature. He knew now for certain where he was and just how terrible and hopeless his own situation had become. Exhaustion and a type of futile acceptance overtook him as he once again faded into the blessed blackness of unconsciousness.

## **Thou Shalt Not**

*Tim Tobin*

The man stood in the dingy motel room with his pants around his ankles. A young woman knelt in front of the man and fondled him. He groaned and thrust towards her but no amount of coaxing or pressure aroused him fully.

“Say it, bitch,” he said.

“No, please, don’t,” she pleaded.

He grabbed her ponytail and yanked.

“Say it, damn you!”

Stiffening perceptibly, he pulled harder on her hair.

“Last chance, you little slut!”

The man stuffed the twenty in his shirt pocket and reached down for his pants.

The young woman began to pray, “Bless me Father, for I have sinned.”

Within moments the priest grunted his satisfaction and made the sign of the cross over the whore.

And then he returned her prayer, “ego te absolvo. I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

## **Giving Birth Behind The Shadows**

*Ron Koppelberger*

She danced near the flames of a desire that overwhelmed her soul, in passion and artful balance. The swell of her stomach complimented the rosy hue on her cheeks. She was perfectly pregnant and wanting a sagacious fry cook named Petulant Samaritan. The sky was dark and dotted with the dreams of a thousand thousand, bleeding indigo and fire, cast by the secrets of generations in the past. She danced and the fry cook rubbed the palm of his hand anxiously, she would give birth tonight, he thought, as he appraised her shining fervency.

She lay on the blanket that was stretched out over the small patch of dandelion weed and prepared to bring her child into the world. The fry cook positioned himself near her legs and waited for the contractions to begin. A moment later she grunted and her labor began.

Hours later Petulant stared at the child he had wrapped in his white cotton shirt. He was amazing and savage both, he had two rows of sharp jutting teeth and a bulbous forehead. Petulant brushed the tiny silver locks from the child's eyes and the woman cooed in affectionate wonder at her infant. She looked at the fry cook then the baby. The baby growled and bit a chunk of flesh from Petulant's arm. He screamed in sudden realization.

He had met the Fairy in the copse behind his house and hadn't realized what her designs would be until the child began to devour him, by then it was too late. His lifeblood seeped into the forest carpet and dotted the dandelions as the creature tore him to shreds. The Fairy looked at her child and whispered, "Innocent child of mine, you have eaten your father, what shall I do?" The baby giggled and burped as she smiled lovingly at him.

The shadows abated at dawn and the dandelions, trampled yet alive with the will of magic, regained their balance with the forest as mother and son made their way into the mystery that was the Secret Wood.

## Spiral of Flies

*Jason Sturner*

Asher took a long, hard look at the pair of stilts resting against the wall of his studio apartment. As the clock struck midnight, the heavy, hypnotic rhythms of the Deftones song “Change (In the House of Flies)” snagged his wavering consciousness. Now in a rage, Asher threw his beer can at the MP3 player, took up an axe, and chopped the stilts into a thousand pieces.

He awoke on his cigarette-burned couch a few hours later, disoriented and hung over. All was quiet but for the crackling radiator and the hum of the refrigerator. If it hadn’t been for a hint of sunrise pressed against the east window and light from beneath the bathroom door, he’d have been in complete darkness.

Struggling to sit up, Asher cracked his back and wiped snot from the whiskers beneath his nose. As dawn slowly filled the room, he flinched to see that the walls appeared forty feet high and made of amber. Dozens of flies zipped back and forth between them, bumping into one another and spiraling down in aerial combat.

Asher threw up his hands, mumbled something about having smoked some bad shit.

He rubbed his eyes hard and picked away the crust. As sight returned, a thin looming figure shimmered into view beside the TV. It was elevated on stilts and perfectly still, black as a starless region of space save for five red orbs on a featureless head. A long, flat object lay across upturned arms, while a tiny mandrill squatted sleepy-eyed on its left shoulder.

With a sharp break from rigidity, the monkey leapt onto the figure’s forearm and pushed the object — which came apart and wafted down like a pair of feathers — to the floor beside the coffee table.

Reluctantly, Asher turned his gaze to the mandrill. The primate squealed once, then nodded at the fallen objects. Now the red orbs on the figure’s amorphous face were moving scattershot.

All but convinced that his visitors must be the combined effect of hangover and some strange, waking dream, Asher reached down and dragged the flat objects up to his lap. There they gave the impression of large, sturdy sheets of paper, partly sticky and gritty as if sprinkled with tar and slapped against dirt. He pinched a soft edge and wiggled it.

In that moment they became all too real.

Though his tongue was limp and his heart began to race with fear, he managed to say, "What for?"

But the elongated figure was gone.

By now the apartment had reverted to its original state, a blazing sunrise pouring in through the east window. Asher sat and scrutinized the objects in the ruddy light. It was then that their true nature was revealed: they were large, transparent insect wings, highly veined, like those of the common house fly. The moment he realized this, they disappeared.

While smoking a multitude of cigarettes, Asher sat contemplating all he had seen. Explanations arose and fell away. A few of them stuck, and in time, his nerves began to settle.

After all, it hadn't been the first time he'd hallucinated.

By noon he was sprawled on the couch with a can of beer between his legs. Scantly clad girls argued and cried about something on TV. Annoyed, Asher shut it off. That's when he heard, or thought he heard, moans coming from inside the nearby bathroom. Must be the neighbors, he told himself. But then the silent, bizarre creature and its servant monkey came to mind.

"So much for drowning nightmares in alcohol," he grumbled to himself, staring down as he took long drags from his cigarette. That's when he happened to notice the faded track marks on his left arm; and that's when the most likely culprit of his hallucinations became apparent: smack.

Horse. Heroin. H. Many names for the same monster. Asher had recently been using, but managed to quit before the urges got too strong. A residual amount, he figured, or mild withdrawal coupled with the intake of alcohol and marijuana, must have triggered those hallucinations. What logic he still possessed encouraged him to sober up, to give the drug ample time to leave his system. But those hideous visions had raised his anxiety to new heights, so he grabbed another beer from the refrigerator and rolled a joint.

The remaining afternoon was spent listening to a playlist of Karnivool, Alice In Chains and other metal bands. He ate cold pizza, strummed his acoustic guitar, wrote bad music lyrics. He was beyond all worry at this point, beyond the constant image of his brain spiraling down a toilet with piss and shit. Gone, too, were thoughts of that haunting figure and its ambiguous agenda.

But it wasn't long before the weed had transformed him into a heap of tangled nerves. "Man, I need *balance*," he mumbled to himself, pacing

the apartment and punching at his head. “Fuck — I need H!”

Pausing to remind himself of the progress made regarding heavy drugs, of the promises made not only to himself, but to his mother and sister, Asher laid down and tried to sleep off the cravings.

To no avail.

By evening he began to shake with fever. That’s when the stilts reappeared for the second night in a row, their quiet, inanimate presence enticing him over. Soon a hissing, inner voice went plugging through the silt of his brain: *Go higher, Asher. Go higher.*

Ridiculously, he covered his ears. The mantra only rose in pitch. He pressed his palms tight against his head and hummed, but the voice breached all barriers.

And then, through trembling hands, that Deftones song from the previous night: some guy changing into a fly and catching fire...

A new thought sparked in Asher’s mind, one that made him stand up straight as a soldier: *destroy the stilts!* That’s when the axe reappeared on the coffee table and he made good use of it. That’s how another night passed without H.

He awoke to more hallucinations in the pre-dawn of the next morning. Once again the walls turned to amber and took on abnormal dimensions. Flies zipped in circles beneath the ceiling, buzzing with laughter. The dark figure reappeared with its prismatic monkey and fly wings. But this time, none of it disappeared like it had the morning before; instead, the room retained its nightmarish qualities and the figure backed into the shadows on its stilts, leaving behind the wings. Something turned on the bathroom light, door now ajar and the moaning inside grew more audible.

Asher kicked back with a fresh joint and squinted at the TV — an attempt to ignore the lingering hallucinations. The day carried on as usual and then it was night. But to his horror, the visions perpetuated; in fact, they had grown more vivid, more ominous.

In the end, they broke him.

“Just one bag,” Asher pleaded over the phone. “No-no — *two*. As soon as you can, dude. Please!”

Cowering in the amber light beneath the laughing flies, Asher sunk into his couch and wept quietly.



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The first dose expelled the hallucinations right away; a huge relief. But then the stilts reappeared, walking themselves back and forth, back and forth in front of the TV. The axe appeared next, so he injected a second dose into his swollen arm and then a third and a fourth. The objects remained. By then he no longer cared and this time, instead of chopping the stilts into pieces, he climbed into them. He wasn't sure how he did this, but he did. He climbed into them and the walls and ceiling expanded to accommodate his new height.

For a time he ambled around in the stilts, possessing natural ability without ever having tried. Indescribable sensations blasted through his body and instilled a cliché oneness with the universe. This was accompanied by a loud rising buzz from behind. When he glanced over his shoulder, there they were: grand, beautifully patterned insect wings.

Magazines fluttered and dust took to air. Hundreds, if not thousands, of tiny black flies appeared all around him: some alive, some trapped inside the colossal amber walls.

The stilts lifted him higher and higher. The wings accelerated and he felt ready to fly. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. But then the moaning from earlier, now amplified, reached his greatly attuned ears. Far below he noticed a shining rectangle of yellow light: the bathroom door was wide open, a long, spiral stream of flies going in.

Somehow Asher was able to see inside that bathroom; it was as if his sight had been usurped by a telescopic lens. And through that myopic vision he saw a naked man lying motionless in the empty bathtub: a syringe stuck in his arm, his skeletal body covered with purple veins, his pale face, *Asher's face*. Nearby, hundreds of flies lined the rims of the sink and bathtub.

In a burst of red light, the dark figure flashed in front of Asher's eyes and he lost his balance. The stilts cracked, snapped apart, fell away. His wings buzzed desperately as he lingered in the air.

And when the man in the bathtub let out a sick, sludgy moan and vomited on his own chest, Asher joined the procession of flies and laughed as he zipped around the convulsing body — laughed and laughed like it was the funniest thing he had ever seen.

## What Waits In The Calendar Shop?

For Marl Lee Roberts, 1951-2010

Just this simple epithet and nothing more, he was my truest friend

Ken L. Jones

The old man had taken new rooms. He took them because he wanted to get away from people and it had been a good move for him. High above a not very busy thrift store nobody bothered him that he didn't want to. On top of that he had a nice view of the street below from the kitchen table where he spent most of his conscious hours nursing cup after cup of coffee while he composed the poetry and stories for which he was known. There was only one storefront across the street. It had been empty when he first moved into his new digs but two months after that somebody opened up shop there. From the sign they raised above it he was able to ascertain that it was a place that dealt in calendars, maybe exclusively. Now he thought that was very weird at first because most people bought their calendars right around Christmas if they bought them at all because lots of people got them as Christmas presents from someone so what would such a place do to keep the store open the rest of the year?

Since it was well past the Christmas season and the place seemed very busy every day, he decided that maybe people came there to have custom calendars made. With this in mind he paid greater attention to the comings and goings of the patrons of the place and was somewhat astonished to notice that every one of them seemed to be bringing calendars with them and then exiting later without them. After ascertaining this he started noticing that some of them only brought a single page from a calendar or in a few cases a clipped out day or two from a single page. Now, being naturally curious by nature, he vowed to get to the bottom of all this and probably would have but he had several deadlines to meet and a very time consuming family genealogy that he was working on for his grandchildren's edification.

It was during this time of searching out his family tree that he came across a TV commercial for a company called Ancestry.com and decided to try out their free trial period. While it wasn't as great as they ballyhooed it to be, it wasn't totally worthless either and he was able to gather quite a bit of the info that he was looking for. During the course of this an idle thought

occurred to him. What if he could use it to trace someone he had lost track of, someone he considered to be the best friend that he had ever had? Unfortunately, as he searched for the person in question, one Marl Lee Roberts, he came to find out that he had recently passed away. The news shouldn't have surprised the old man because Marl had never been a particularly healthy specimen but somehow the impact of learning this struck him a devastating blow. As he read the printout of the coroner's report of his best friend's death, he felt sadder and more oppressed than he had about anything since his own father's passing. The impact of this brought his work to a screeching halt and he found himself obsessing about all the things he had always planned to say to Marl when he re-established contact with his lost best friend. Somehow the idea that this could now never happen shook the old man to his very core.

The only thing that seemed to distract him from this was his all-consuming curiosity about the strange calendar shop that he had now spent so many hours staring at. Finally hoping to shake himself out of these terrible doldrums, he resolved to actually go down there and explore the place for himself hoping to get to the bottom of whatever secrets it might hold. He waited a long time in line and, even though he attempted to strike up several conversations with the people in front of him and in back of him, he was unsuccessful. As he looked up and down its long length he couldn't help but notice that he was the only one there who wasn't clutching some calendar page or a fragment of one.

Finally what seemed to him to be hours later he was inside the store itself and he could barely suppress a gasp when he stepped over the threshold. First of all the place was cavernous, even though it didn't appear to be from the outside of it. Most of it was an endlessly deep warehouse illuminated here and there by skylights in the ceiling whose shafts of light were golden and full of dust motes. Most of the place seemed to be taken up by what appeared to be library shelves upon which sat wire baskets, each carefully labeled. By squinting to look at the baskets closest to him he could see that they were crammed with calendar pages and parts of ones. Stranger than that were the people who were working in the store. There were lots of them, but they only seemed to be of two types. The men more than somewhat reminded him of the famous male model Fabio but they were even more muscular and handsome than he was. The women were also identical looking and resembled nothing so much as the most perfect blonde

haired blue-eyed Playboy bunny of the year that Hugh Hefner had ever airbrushed into existence. The one hundred or so of them were all identically clad in what seemed to be long blue and white choir robes, tight fitting powder blue pants and soft black boots and they all seemed to smile to themselves as they went about their business. He had a feeling that all of them were watching him even though none of them ever made direct eye contact with him. He might have looked at them longer had it not be for the clearing of a gravelly mucus rich voice in the shadows behind him.

“What have you got for sale?” the unseen voice inquired.

“Nothing,” the old man replied.

“Then why did you stand in line all of that time?” growled the voice as the unseen man moved forward in his chair and was illuminated by a stray shaft of light.

The old man was freaked out by how much this person resembled the great character actor Ed Asner. He was chomping on the butt of a cigar and had on a pair of plaid suspenders.

“I live across the street and I was just curious about your place. I assume you sell calendars here or something like that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, something like that, at least sometimes under the right circumstances. What’s your name?”

The old man told him his full name even though he wasn’t sure why he did so then the other man disappeared into the shadowy depths again. The old man then heard the sound of pages being turned as the other man mumbled to himself.

After a long while he said, “Yes, you’re here and right on time. We have exactly what you need. It will cost you all the cash you have on you and here’s how it works. We’re going to give you something in a minute and tonight before you go to sleep take the calendar page or portion of it and place it under your pillow. This works out best if you start out real slow and you really should begin with the first day that you met Marl Lee Roberts... that is why you want to do this, isn’t it?”

The old man just nodded yes, stunned by how surreal and unexpected all this was.

“If it works for you, you can come back for more. You’re pre-approved according to my ledger here. Now how much cash are you carrying on you today?”

The old man took out his wallet and retrieved the hundred and forty-seven dollars that was in it and put it on the shadowy desk in front of him.

“Yes, this is more than enough to get you started,” he said, then he got on the fuzzed out loudspeaker in front of him and called out for Marhariel. One of the Fabio clones came forward and led the old man deep into the warehouse where he retrieved a complete calendar page and three partial sections.

Marhariel put his hand on the old man’s shoulder and smiled in a sincere way when he handed them to him. Too stunned by all this to think straight, the old man floated out of the place on numb feet and somehow, without conscious thought, found himself back in his sequestered rooms. Being exhausted he immediately prepared the calendar pages on his bed as the other man had instructed him and fell upon it, still fully clothed. As he drifted off something about the segue into the past reminded him of the same rush and thrill he got whenever he watched his DVD of the musical version of the Phantom of the Opera, the one directed by Joel Schumacher where the disfigured crooner sailed through the Paris sewers on his gondola boat. The past of course turned out to be the past and what it once was and will always be but it was also at the same time pulsatingly pristine and brand new to him as he relived it all.

The first day, naturally enough, that he re-experienced was when he began work at Knott’s Berry Farm. He had been hired for minimum wage to work less than fulltime at night guarding the amusement park’s parking lots and making sure that fence jumpers did not get into the place for free. The work was alternately way too boring or way too exciting for his taste but since he had just gotten married and what he had majored in at college didn’t translate into too much in the real world, he had to make a living. He liked a lot of the other guys that he worked with doing this, but one in particular seemed to gravitate to him. He was exactly his age, was married, had a small baby daughter and was moonlighting at this job from his fulltime work in a hospital laundry. Unlike the old man, he had been hired because his mother-in-law and brother-in-law were both long time employees of the place.

At first the old man hadn’t know what to make of this rotund little man from Texas with the bad teeth and glasses and wiry hair and mustache because he really had never been very sociable even as a child and had never had any very deep or long term friendships with other men or boys.

Having said that, there was something about Marl Lee Roberts that won him right over and made him come to regard him as the brother he never had. For one thing they pretty much seemed to like all the same things. Then there was the fact that he found that he was comfortable in saying anything that came into his head to Marl who acted like he was honestly interested in hearing it and so he wound up taking him into his confidence and telling him things that one would only tell their own priest or minister.

Then there was the fact that Marl was honestly the most generous person he had ever encountered. He literally would do anything for the old man to help him out at any time and at any place and never asked for anything in return or even brought it up after he did it. Because of all this the old man and his wife and the Roberts family became very close very fast, which was especially fortuitous since about six months into all this the old man's wife became pregnant unexpectedly with their first child. All of that was very disorientating to the old man and he literally couldn't have gotten through it without Marl's constant encouragement and many acts of helpfulness. This relationship burned brightly for about six more months after his first son was born and then, needing better employment for his growing family, the old man went fulltime doing roustabout work for the state school district and, as happens, despite either side not wanting it to, the two fast friends drifted apart due to lack of proximity.

A decade passed during which another son was born and, due to extreme dissatisfaction with the school district work, the old man pursued his real passion which was to be a writer of comic books. He was just in the earliest stages of making this come true when one day he took his family out to Disneyland where they had year round passes and by chance met Marl and his family who had also added a son to his kin, on Tom Sawyer's Island All was wonderful once again and it was if they had never drifted apart. Marl became instrumental in helping the old man make his writing career happen, including driving him hundreds of miles sometimes to meet people and go to such places as the San Diego Comic Con and Disney and Paramount Studios, which was both vital and deeply appreciated as the old man had never driven a car nor ever would.

Then another five years flashed by during which the families were inseparable and during which the old man drove himself so hard and fast achieving his writing goals that he shattered his health. During this time of sickness and confinement, the ever active and gregarious Roberts clan

drifted on to new concerns and as the old man's family moved further away from where Marl lived in his mother-in-law's rented house, they once again lost touch.

This time, being so distracted, the old man didn't give much thought to it and kept thinking that they would come back together again as they had in the past. His thoughts of Marl's friendship were never far from him and as he graduated from writing comic books to writing short stories and poetry for publication, a thinly disguised version of Marl crept into a series that he wrote on a regular basis about an occult detective in the 1970's. The old writer's children grew up during his time and moved on and at some point after that, his wife grew tired of him and so he found himself single once again.

He tried living in a couple of different places then settled into his current address where he occupied most of his waking hours producing his literary endeavors while pretty much cut off from the rest of the world. Through it all he was hoping for one more reunion with Marl and would have settled even for a simple phone conversation with him but somehow, despite the old man's best efforts, that never came to be and then with the accidental discovery of Robert's death certificate online, all hope of that was forever erased this side of the other side. Something about learning this had a very bad physical effect on the old man and his health and it literally became as if he felt himself slowly fading from existence. Now each new day he felt like he was becoming more and more of a ghost and he actually embraced the idea of that. Through it all he even more intensely sought out the comfort of the calendar shop and the pleasant memories of his friendship with Marl in better days that were available there.

It was in the coldest part of that winter that he realized that his end was near but that didn't hold much fear for him. He took great solace in how kind and caring the old Ed Asner look alike was. Then one day "Ed" came out from behind the desk and put a fatherly arm around him. He escorted him away from the front of the building into a golden buttery shaft of light and whispered quietly into his ear, "I think you've known for a long time who we really are and what this place really is. Tonight you will pass over in your sleep. I think that you might want to go into one of these calendar days and stay there forever. Correct me if I'm wrong about that."

The old man, who could barely talk, just nodded yes. He now realized that he could only travel back into the past via calendar one last time and

that he would never be able to return again to the real world after he did so. The basic idea of that didn't bother him much and his recent reunions with Marl, during which they had relived the totality of their deep friendship, had been more than satisfying the second time around. But yet which of those many good days would he want to be encased within forever? Then it dawned on him and he went and spent his last dime in the world on a calendar square that said January 8, 1983. As he had done before, he placed it under his pillow and went to sleep, only this was a deeper and even more profound sleep than any of the others or of any other sleep he had ever experienced or had ever heard of before. He awoke in his and his wife's bed back in the apartment that they and their young sons shared. All was as it was back then. Donna and his sons had already gone visiting her parents and as he well knew Marl was already on the way to pick him up so that they could go aluminum canning together. The old man pulled on some scrougey old work clothes and ate a handful of bologna and American cheese which he washed down with Royal Crown cola which he drank from the large bottle in their refrigerator and then Marl arrived. The old man brought along his homemade can picker which was two interconnected steel tubes that could be telescoped out from one another and which ended in a long bent out coat hanger. He also brought along several large red potato sacks that were perfect for keeping cans and deposit bottles in. Marl and he had decided to check out a far away beach to see what treasures lay there because everyone had told them that it was chockfull of such items. All the way there they had chatted happily about everything under the sun especially their future plans as they listened to the oldies station K-Earth 101 and grooved on the good old rock and roll from the fifties and sixties that it played.

Now none of Marl's cars was ever much to look at and the one he had that day was no exception but it felt to the old man like he was riding in the finest of stretch limos. Before long they were at the beach and it was a perfect salty gray day there and the place felt tangy and bracing. The delicious smells of the previous evening's barbeque pits made the air pregnant and mouthwatering. The cawing of the seagulls was in perfect synch with the rhythm of the pounding surf. Marl and the old man were like kids again. All their cares were far away from them as they picked up bottles and aluminum cans and odd bits of bric-a-brac that caught their fancy. In a very short few hours they had almost more than Marl could take



away in his car. On the way home the old man knew with every cell of his body that they would stop for simple fish sandwiches, malts and onion rings at McDonalds and then would visit several used book shops and comic book stores. Then they would go back to Marl's funky rented house where both their families would be waiting to join them for an evening of Marl's "burnt bernie" hot dogs cooked on his scorching portable barbeque. This would be followed by a night spent watching newly released VHS's that their wives had rented for them.

All seemed right with the world because there was still so much time ahead of them, time to have fun time before they would have to grow old, time to accomplish all that they hoped to achieve and as Marl's mother was often quoted by him as saying "And it was good" as good as anything could be and truly all of this was Heaven for it would now never have to end and would keep on recycling itself through all of eternity like an aluminum can picked up on a perfect beach by the two best friends that there ever were.

## Off Limits

*Matthew Wilson*

Mother said Mort must never open the closed door.

Off limits.

It was built on a weak fault in the house and the whole thing would crumble to the foundations should he so much as twist the knob. That's what she said when he was older. But as a boy she'd frightened him off with tales of terror. It was a portal to another world where mighty monsters devoured curious children by the handful like candy.

There was a demon down there that killed missing children in the area, sometimes when alone in bed he was quite sure he could hear its chains drag along the floor. Mom said he must never speak of it, for words gave it power and would break its bonds. Come for him.

When he was older, Mort had recognised the ridiculous nature of the whole thing. He wasn't scared of the dog Mom presumably kept chained up in there, since Dad ran away all those years ago he'd had to man up fast. Face the world and all its dangers. He wasn't scared of a door, or what lay beyond it.

But Mom was at work and he refused to be bullied by the notion of being under siege by unknown monsters. Always looking over his shoulder in belief some ghastly gremlin was poised ready to spring upon him and drink the jelly from his eyes.

Today he was sixteen. Mom expected him to get a job. Make his own home for monsters, a nest for himself. He refused to let this dark cloud follow him. He smiled and waved as Mom drove to work.

Today would be the day.

If he was leaving soon then he would know. At any cost.

"Keys, keys," he chanted, ripping open kitchen drawers. Bobby pins and threaded needles. Cheese graters and forks.

"Fuck, where are you?" he yelled, looked at the clock.

Eleven.

Mom would be home in five hours. He'd that long to tear the house apart and carefully clean it again to cover the fact he'd gone against her wishes. He had to know, it was a maddening itch pressing against his brain.

The idea that something ghastly hid down there, waiting for him, calling for him through the thin walls had cost him many sleepless nights.

If he was to escape the demons of his childhood he had to know.

Twelve o'clock.

"Screw this," he moaned and headed to the garden shed where Dad had left his rusted tools and Mom had no mind to throw them away. The axe was old and heavy. But it would do.

"I'm all grown up you evil bastard." He told the door as he advanced. "I'm not scared of you anymore."

He raised the blade over his head and coughed as red dust powder fell on his head like icing. "I'm coming, do your worst!"

For all of Mom's warning there was no welcoming red eyes watching him from the dark holes he cut into it and this proof fuelled his arms. His hands bled where the flying splinters raked his nails but he was elated. Had to look down to make sure he wasn't flying. He was tearing down sixteen years of bad memories. Sunlight filled the basement and burnt away the nightmares.

Mort! What the hell have you done to my door!

He didn't care. He had to prove to himself it had not been real, just a trick to keep him Mommy's good little boy. Kick a ball against her window and the monster would reach up through the sheets at midnight and drag him into air vents where it left the best meat to mature.

Should he swear, the thing in the basement would rip his lips off.

Be good and you'll live.

But now Mort was a man. No longer under mother's thumb.

He found the torch under the kitchen sink next to the bleach and laughed as he wiped away the cobwebs across the door and started descending. "So it's a basement. I knew it, I knew it!"

Click. He snapped the torch on and scared the rats in the corner as he swept the gold beam from left to right. The windows down here had been boarded up from the insides. Boards from the floor had been ripped up, nailed across the glass.

Mort squinted. There seemed to be marks on the inside of them.

Rats?

Five shallow trenches were scarred into the surface, crimson coloured.

Fingernails?

Mort felt cockroaches cross his laces as he emitted a shriek and kicked them off. His left one was still in the air when the right slid out from under him on the guts of the opened creature. He groaned, playing the light across the dead neighbour's cat with bite marks in its larger intestine.

Something was moving under the stairs.

It breathed heavy, back hunched. A chain around its rotten green ankle hooked it to the wall. Mort's innards cooled like he'd eaten an ice cream in one go for a dare. Jesus, it was real. A monster called his basement home. It giggled as it limped forward, dust came down from the ceiling as the chain tightened and bled its torn flesh.

It roared and Mort dropped the torch.

The creature's eyes flashed like rubies in the dawn.

"Jenny?" it croaked, voice tiny. Poisoned. Mort could hear the thing sniffing, detecting the scent of his blood. "No, not Jenny. Friend, good friend. Good smell. Good taste."

Weeping, Mort lay down, reaching for the torch. Don't eat me. I'll be good. What Mom wants me to be. Please let me live. Let me see the light again. His fingers curled around the torch and thrust its beam into the thing's face like it would burn him. "Back, back off!" he wailed and felt his heart flutter. "Dad?"

The thing laughed girlishly. "I'm not bad, Jenny. I'll be good, good daddy. Good boy. Let me go now. I love you, only you. Not her--"

Mort screamed as the cold hands went around his throat. But not for long.

## Two Cups

*Kevin L. Jones*

“What’s up with that?” Fiona mumbled to no one in particular as she watched her new roommate take two cups of coffee into her room and seal herself within it. Why does she do that? Over the last few weeks that they had been living together she had noticed this strange phenomenon on many occasions. Whenever her roommate made herself dinner she took two plates of food into her room and whenever she got something to drink she would always take two glasses in there, too. For the life of her, Fiona could not figure out why. She knew that her roommate was alone, so why the two cups? Fiona often heard her roommate Cindy carrying on animated conversations whilst in her room. At first she had thought that Cindy had been talking to someone on the phone but now she was not so sure; besides, as far as she could tell, her roommate had no friends or close family that she was aware of. Fiona wished for the thousandth time that her old roommate Robin had not ran off with some guy and left her high and dry. Not being able to pay the rent by herself, Fiona had taken out an ad in the local paper in hope of finding a new roommate to help out with the bills. No one had responded to her advertisement apart from the strange and withdrawn Cindy. Fiona had not really wanted to take her on as her roommate but what choice did she have? Now that she had been living with her for a little over a month, Fiona wished that she had just given up her apartment and moved back in with her parents.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Cindy came out of her room. She looked at Fiona with the same blank expression that she always had and muttered in a monotone voice, “Something’s come up. I have to leave for a while.”

Fiona smiled as she watched her depart. This was her chance to poke around in Cindy’s room and find out what on earth she’d been doing in there. She walked over to the door and tried to turn the handle. Of course it was locked. It was always locked. Fiona was not surprised, after all Cindy was obsessed with her privacy and whenever she felt Fiona was invading it, she would go nuts. This did not deter her. The locks on their doors were of an inferior quality and could easily be picked. She went into the kitchen and retrieved a screwdriver which she used to gain entrance to the room.

All the shades were drawn and it was pitch black in her roommate's private inner sanctum. Fiona rubbed her arms. It was uncomfortably cold which was quite strange, given that it was very warm in the rest of the apartment. As she fumbled around in the darkness looking for the light switch, she could have sworn that she could hear the sound of someone breathing. She finally found a lamp and hurriedly turned it on. She quickly looked around the room but could see no one there. Everything was obsessively neat. Nothing was out of place. The room was as boring and bland as her roommate herself. Fiona looked over at a small table in the corner. It had two chairs next to it and on its surface sat two coffee cups and saucers. Fiona's heart almost stopped beating when she saw one of the cups rise into the air. Fiona strained her eyes in the gloomy interior of the room and could just make out the shadowy outline of a young girl sitting in one of the chairs.

The apparition set the cup down and turned towards its unwanted guest. The spirit shrieked, "Get out of our room now!"

Fiona let out a low moan and not only fled the room but ran out of the apartment altogether. She went straight to her parents' house. A few days later she sent her brother back to the apartment to retrieve her things. Her family thought that she was behaving quite erratically but she didn't care. She would not go back, could not go back there ever again. As far as Fiona was concerned the apartment now belonged to Cindy and her roommate and they would never have to worry about her invading their privacy again.

## **The End**

***Michelle Worthington***

All I see as I close my eyes  
Is a young dying girl  
Recite her last lines  
The play she rehearses  
The play we call life  
Is a story of heartache  
A race to end life  
A race to finish  
What a father began  
To shut away fears  
Of being hurt again  
She looks out the window  
Her eyes filled with tears  
She picks up the drink  
She picks up the pills  
Her mind races back  
To those terrible years  
She can't stand the thought  
Of living one more day  
With the pain and the memories  
Never loving again.

## Hunger

*Neil Leckman*

The door slammed and the sound echoed down the road lined with empty industrial buildings. When the buildings had been in use people always wondered why they would build an industrial complex around a lone house, ramshackle and abandoned looking. Shutters hung at odd angles from the upstairs windows, hinges long ago broken. On windy days they beat out a staccato of bangs, like trapped birds trying to pull free and fly. Jagged slivers of glass were all that remained of the windows, like rotten teeth. Portions of the roof were gone, leaving gaping holes that birds flew in and out of on a regular basis. The house seemed to have an aura of wrongness to it, like the way heat makes the air shimmer on hot summer days.

A battered old Buick sat out front, steam rising from a broken radiator hose. Seeing the house from the highway, they had hoped there might be a phone, or at least a working sink to put water in the radiator. So Lucy and Greg had pulled off the freeway, going through the front gate, an ornate metal one, now leaning against the cracked brick wall that was the entrance to the old industrial complex and down a long road lined with massive industrial building, some with giant steel doors that sat open to the world. Inside was the detritus left behind the day everyone left. The sound of the hissing radiator was amplified by the emptiness as they drew towards the empty house.

“It looks more deserted down here than it did from the freeway,” Greg said.

“Why would anyone build a house here?” Lucy asked, not expecting an answer.

There was a squealing groan behind them as the metal gate fell to the ground with a crash. Both of them jumped at the noise, then laughed at their nervousness.

“I wonder how long this place has been abandoned?” Greg commented.

“I remember a story years ago when I was little about an industrial complex that was closed due to an unusual number of accidents. People said the place was cursed because it had been built on sacred ground,” Lucy told him.



“Really? If anyplace looked cursed this place does,” Greg said.

Just then a large flock of birds flew out of the broken windows in one of the taller buildings, casting a shadow over their car.

“The birds don’t seem too bothered by the place,” Greg said as he pulled the car in front of the broken down picket fence.

They got out of the car and walked down the cracked sidewalk to the front porch. Greg felt the boards sag a little then hold firm. “OK, let’s see if we can find a faucet that works. I’m pretty sure a phone is out of the question.” Saying that he walked up to the front door and stopped.

The front door was in perfect condition and the doorknob gleamed in the sunlight.

“That’s odd,” Greg commented, pointing at the shiny brass doorknob.

Lucy was trying to see inside past the shattered window on the front porch, but the gloom inside was impenetrable.

Greg reached out and grabbed the knob, which felt oddly soft and warm to the touch, and turned it. The door opened without any problem, its hinges well oiled and looking brand new. Inside was total darkness, like the daylight wasn’t allowed past the threshold somehow.

“I say we get this done with quick and get out of here; this place is giving me the creeps,” Lucy said as she stepped past Greg into the house. Greg followed and was surprised when the door slammed itself shut behind him, the sound of the lock engaging as it did.

“Greg, I think I can see something over here,” Lucy said. This was followed by a scream of abject horror which rose in octaves until it became a gurgling whimper. Greg ran towards her and the house welcomed him as well.

Outside one of the shutters straightened itself out and its appearance changed to a new one. The house knew it wasn’t enough. It needed more to survive. Out in front of the house the old Buick sank into the asphalt which had become like quicksand. Once it was out of sight the ground firmed up again. In the building in front of the house a lone bird’s cry echoed as the sun set and the house waited.

## **The Heir**

*Olivia Arieti*

Walnut Court was enormous, sumptuous, majestic; a luxurious display of wealth and power accumulated in years of continuous flow of riches from all corners of the globe. Each suite was overwhelmed with precious furniture and objects, damasked tapestry and golden framed mirrors and paintings; it would have had the aspect of a fairy tale palace if it hadn't been for its surplus of everything that conferred to the whole setting an almost decayed aspect, if not totally kitsch.

The mansion had belonged to the family for ages; when Arthur and Harry's misogynous old uncle died, they became the owners of the whole property.

The brothers hardly ever spoke to each other, still nurturing childhood feelings of hate and jealousy; their wives, Judy and Anne, probably influenced by the gentlemen's attitude, kept those feelings alive due to their haughtiness and strong sense of competition, both being very beautiful women.

Neither couple had children but up to then it didn't seem a matter of great importance.

Much to their annoyance they had to meet and spend some time together at Walnut Court to discuss the inheritance issues.

The possibility to sell it and divide the profits wasn't welcomed for all the family's wealth and secrets were there. Moreover, it wouldn't be easy to find a purchaser for such a valuable treasure.

The position of the manor was another hindrance to the sale. It was far from any urban centre and situated among a harsh landscape privileged by heavy rainfalls and constantly swept by the northern wind. Outside, lofty stone walls surrounded the mansion, rough pasture stretched out; the scarce trees resembled bleak skeletons with boughs as clammy arms where sinister volatiles perched ominously; the few paths were rocky and sided by wild shrubberies. Most often the fear of encountering paranormal creatures or even terrifying monsters kept the locals and visitors away.

Its ghastly surroundings alimanted spooky stories also supported by the rumours of irreverent deeds that had occurred within the walls; some also referred to a crime so horrid that no one ever dared to speak about it.

All creepy feelings, however, vanished as soon as the few dauntless visitors passed through the wrought iron gate and the creaks of its rusty hinges had become a faint echo; a park rich with walnut trees and fountains welcomed them while neoclassical statues paved the way to the main entrance, where an imposing wooden door opened on the resplendent halls.

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Arthur and Judy were the first to arrive, followed by Harry and Anne. The bleak November rain hitting against the panes and the habitual wind with its unpleasant gusts that managed to enter the rooms made the atmosphere cold and gloomy.

The new owners couldn't avoid displaying their uneasiness; while the sisters in law kept glaring at each other as fierce rivals, the brothers attempted a formal conversation. The topics verged on ordinary matters followed by comments on the luxury of the house. The ladies expressed their distaste for some pieces of furniture, decorations and tapestry, too baroque or too bizarre, too old or too ordinary.

The sisters in law appeared even lovelier than usual, as if each wanted their beauty to stand out unparalleled. Judy's raven black hair framed her delicate face where two green eyes kept sparkling with lustful glances. Her elegant attitude somehow contrasted with the lust of the glance. She was in her thirties, in the maturity of womanhood where the glow of youth hadn't totally faded yet.

Anne was a few years older, with hazel eyes and red hair; even if she wasn't as beautiful as her rival, her reserved demeanour, graceful manners and bewitching smile made her most desirable.

The two men were in their forties but both looked older, probably due to their austere aspect that seemed to mask a voracious appetite of forbidden wantonness. As a matter of fact, their education had been extremely severe; their mother, a noble lady of German origin, preferred rigidity to tenderness; their father, a retired general, never betrayed any sort of affection afraid it might soften virility. Idleness was considered a consuming disease that inevitably brought to all sort of vices; debauchery was its inevitable consequence.

Not all precautions were enough to keep temptation out, though; it was beautifully embodied in Violet, the new maid. As soon as she arrived in

the household, Arthur and Harry resolved to stray from their parents' recommendations. Violet and disobedience were a too strong appeal.

The girl with violet eyes and a childish smile became aware at once of her young masters' attention. The lure of a more prosperous future induced the ambitious maid to accept the invitations of both youths.

Unfortunately, she couldn't know how strongly their most natural instincts had been repressed, how horridly vice and sin had been depicted.

Taking advantage of their parents' absence, the brothers, in turns, shut the servant's room door, tore off her clothes and let their inhibited thirst be quenched. For the first time they had become accomplices. Desire exploded in a wild outburst of primordial instincts, where all passions were unleashed; their insatiable lust made them violent if not brutal. While Arthur was yelling with morbid satisfaction, Harry contorted himself with pain and jealousy; the following night it was Arthur's turn to suffer for his brother's sadistic pleasure.

When their mother returned and saw the bruises and scratches on Violet's face and arms, she immediately suspected. As soon as night fell, she followed the girl in her room, shut the door and ordered her to undress completely. Her body was a horrifying sight, the coagulated blood contrasted with the ivory of the skin now also marred by purple stains. As the girl burst in tears, desperate, the noble lady hit her for such a shameful conduct till the servant, prey of pain and rage, threatened to disgrace her sons and the whole family. The woman turned blue, snatched a bronze bust lying on the chest of drawers and shut the girl's mouth forever.

With the help of her husband, she buried the disfigured corpse under a giant walnut tree. From then on the plant stopped producing fruits.

Not a word was spoken about the brutal deed; soon after the author of crime went mad and took her life. The general's death followed in rather mysterious circumstances.

It was believed that a horrible curse had befallen Walnut Court even if its cause had always been unknown. A sinister presence was hovering above in particular on stormy nights waiting to doom its inhabitants. Some passers-by referred of a shrouded figure roaming desperate along the landscape moaning and cursing at the same time; old servants instead always mentioned a martyred naked corpse running around the giant walnut tree at nightfall.

Rather sceptical by disposition, the brothers had never been disturbed by the rumours about the curse; both regarded with suspicion the disappearance of the maid but no one ever dared to manifest their doubts. Despite the brutality of their audacity and its consequences, neither felt ashamed nor guilty for their past behaviour; vice had rooted in their souls and morbid perversion still stirred them.

They couldn't know that Violet was still waiting for them and had begun weaving her horrid revenge.

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The evenings were spent in the living room in front of the fireplace. Arthur served some sherry and, as the couples started sipping their drinks, a warm glow brightened their faces; they had become more affable and the uneasiness that characterised their first meetings was beginning to disappear.

Harry couldn't avoid gazing at his brother's wife; Judy was standing by the fireplace idly watching the flames; he could feel their heat penetrate her body and his as he slowly moved closer invited by her glance; her lips slightly disclosed as if on the point of whispering all the words the ravished partner wanted to hear. The old pleasure of transgression had been kindled again.

Arthur instead was immediately bewitched by Anne, who was sitting beside him. Her sleeveless crimson gown seemed to capture the blaze of the fire as her eyes gleamed with its light. The appeal of the illicit attraction had already intrigued him.

Morbid fantasies and sordid desires kept animating their evenings as the conversation became more languid.

On one of those occasions Anne suddenly remarked, "Too bad that neither of us has a child to hand over this immense property to one day."

Judy smiled complacently; for the first time she admired her sister in law.

"Well," replied Arthur, "it would have been a good reason to keep it, at least."

"It would be a pity to sell it off, though," remarked Harry dryly, "for I'm sure no one could afford it nowadays."

Nothing more was added that night; both couples went to bed, feverish to gain what didn't belong to them; strangely, the greed to possess Walnut Court was the only emotion that didn't stir their souls.

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As time passed, the couples got closer. Arthur and Harry began regretting the time they had spent ignoring one another while the sisters in law proposed some changes or removal of the furniture and objects. Long walks in the park were taken in the morning or in the early afternoon and the brothers even suggested they go hunting together if ever there could be animals that dared venture into such isolated and barren areas.

The evenings in front of the fireplace were the most anticipated moments. The sumptuous living room would suddenly warm up and the glances become more intense. Judy and Anne changed attire every evening; their gowns were always provocative and desire was clearly seeping from their bodies.

All were aware that adultery was hovering in the air; somehow the combination of challenge and wantonness amused them; the elevated hazard of the game they were playing made it most appealing if not irresistible.

"We must find a solution," Arthur finally said while serving the now familiar sherry, "we can't go on like this."

All gazed at him dismayed; despite their feverish lust no one ever dared to display it clearly.

"Yes, we should," confirmed his brother vaguely.

"If only we had an heir," Anne repeated sadly. "Walnut Court would remain in the family."

"Not everything is lost," Judy almost whispered as she cast Harry a seductive glance.

By now the four of them were looking at each other inquisitively and ardently, no one daring to say what shouldn't be said.

Arthur broke the silence. "What didn't work before may have a new chance... if conditions were different..."

His sister in law smiled. "That's what I was thinking."

"When all doors are closed," Judy hinted.

"Is that a problem?" Anne interrupted.

“No, dear, we all have keys, don’t we?” Without waiting for a reply, Judy insisted, “When doors are closed all secrets are protected and all deeds are hidden, the most horrible and the most...” here she paused and cast another glance at Harry who uneasily lowered his eyes.

A meaningful silence followed until once again Arthur intervened. “I reckon we must consider what is at stake.”

“That’s why whatever chance shouldn’t be missed,” Anne insisted.

“I’m sure we all agree that Walnut Court deserves an heir,” Harry concluded, almost but not quite impatient.

None of them could see the macabre shadow lurking in the darkest corner of the room or the horrid grin on its skeletal face.

Desire, lust and passion raged furiously that night behind the bedroom doors. Such was the intensity of the adulterous pleasure that sadistic perversion prevailed and sharp inhuman cries cut the pitch-black darkness that had fallen upon the mansion.

Debauchery had found its way in but apparently no way out for all doors and windows remained forever closed at Walnut Court, the huge wooden entrance one as well.

The bolts had been accurately welded and the keys buried deep under the giant walnut tree; unfortunately no one could get out and fetch them.

# **The Thief of Bad Gags**

*David Perlmutter*

## **I.**

Our people have many secrets among us. Secrets that represent our history, our identity and our collective background. We hold these things close to our hearts and our minds and, if anyone dares to try to take them away from us, they soon find out who they're messing with. Just like that untutored hack nearly- and I do mean, nearly- did to us before we stopped him.

But I'd better go back and start from the beginning, if you're going to understand everything that happened.

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What happened, in precise chronological order, was this:

I was summoned from my duties at the studio to an emergency meeting of the American Federation of Cartoon Characters (AFCC), of which I was a founding member and am now the holder of the title of Past President. Contrary to popular belief, we cartoon characters, or "toons", as the media kindly refer to us, do have lives beyond our narrow daily or weekly existences on your television screens.

Anyway...

It's not too far from my base on the lot to the AFCC headquarters, so I was there as soon as I possibly could be. In the board room, I found the current crop of executives in a state of panic as they sat around the table, looking like they might crack up any minute. Which can happen, believe me.

"Hi, guys," I said, entering the room unannounced. "What's up?"

As if they had been shocked by an electric cattle prod, they all dived under the table at once, shrieking loudly as they did. Then, they realized that it was me, not the boogie man they were worried about and they re-emerged, trying - and failing-to put calmer demeanours on their faces.

"What the hell is going on here?" I demanded. "You aren't normally this skittish - any of you. So what gives?"



Bess Fishelman, the current Secretary, rushed over to me, her panic-stricken, nose-less face providing a shocking contrast to the smoothness of her red hair and the swirling contours of her ichthyian body. .

“Leslie!” she shouted at me. “Thank God you’re here!”

“Why are you acting this way?” I insisted.

Before she could say anything, Duddy Piddles, the heavily over-talking canine Treasurer, knocked Bess (unintentionally) into the front of the table and embraced me hysterically, tears streaming down his face.

“It’s horrible!” he bawled. “Horrible!”

“What is it?” I demanded “What?”

“Jeez, Les’!” said Paul Gutman, the vice-president and a pseudo-human like me, albeit rotund, bespectacled and adult in form. “That’s awful tough language to use over a book! I thought ya liked reading!”

“Don’t change the subject, Gutman!” I answered. “What the hell has a book got to do with you acting more like lunatics than usual?”

“Oh, that’s it, huh?” Paul rose abruptly to his feet, an achievement considering his stocky girth. “I have seven goddamn bottles of beer for breakfast and I’m a goddamned lunatic now? Ya little yella bastid...”

“It’s ‘bastard’!” I retorted, correcting his New England pronunciation. “And I can’t be one, you moron. I’m a girl!”

“Girls can be bastids, too. Like you and Bess and my wife and...”

“Hey!” Bess interjected angrily. “Wait a minute...”

“You, sir,” I said to Gutman as I pointed my finger at him, “are on my last nerve...”

“Well, I’m glad for that!” he said.

“Enough already!”

Cadmium, the current president, spun her office chair at the head of the table around from the back, so that she was now visible to us all after hiding away during the first part of the discussion. She’s a small Dalmatian puppy, almost Chihuahua-like with her long ears and underweight body. But make no mistake - she is not to be messed with. It was this shout from her that cut through all the noise so that some measure of order could be imposed on this chaotic situation.

“Can we please get a mellower atmosphere in here?” she demanded.

You little bitch, I thought as I gritted my teeth. You so completely stole my shtick.

“Again with this hippie Disney shit!” Gutman interjected.

“Just because I worked for Disney...” snapped Cadmium.

“...once...” Gutman added, needling her.

“...does *not* mean everyone who worked or works there is a ‘tight-ass’!” Cadmium finished. “If you are not going to respect me, *Mr.* Gutman, you might as well resign right now!”

Paul hadn’t seen that coming. All of us holding positions with the AFCC value our involvement and not being involved in some way due to resignation or other reasons is tantamount to being ostracized. Thus, Cadmium was basically calling Paul’s bluff on this one.

“Fine,” he said tersely. He pointed to the most eastwardly window, moved his chair there and sat down in it. “Ya want a man’s opinion, I’ll be over here!”

“That won’t be necessary!” Cadmium growled at him. Then, finally, she turned to me and gave me the answers I was searching for.

“We have just gotten word of the impending publication of a book,” she said dryly. “A very important book!”

“So what?” I said without feeling. “Books are published all the time. Lots of them about us, too. Hell, my show has had a whole library published on it!”

“Yes,” she said, as she rolled her eyes angrily and enviously. “We’re all aware of how successful you and your family are...”

“Just get to the point already! I haven’t got all day!”

“Do you remember, about fifteen or so years ago, when there appeared on television a masked magician who promised to reveal all the secrets of his craft, so that they would be secrets no more?”

“Of *course* I do...”

Cadmium held up a paw to silence me.

“Never mind the details. You’re aware of the story, I gather?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we are in a similar kettle of fish, my dear. And, if our secrets are revealed, we will face exposure and destruction far worse than any of the world’s magicians faced then. They faced merely the destruction of their careers. With us, if the secrets of our existence beyond the screen were to ever come about, it would mean the end of our lives!”

The wheels of my brain began turning a little faster in my head. My God! All of our secrets forever exposed and held up to the light to expose us, mock us, kill us!

“How?” I demanded. “How in the world did you let this happen to us?”

“It wasn’t us,” Cadmium said, critically. “It was the Canadians!”

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” I said.

“Do I have to write it out for you, Stinson?” said Cadmium. “The bloody book is going to be published in Canada by a Canadian publisher!”

“So this book is somehow going to tell all of our secrets to the world?”

“Unless we stop him.”

“How? The law?”

“It’s too late for that.”

“Do you know anything about the author, or how he got his information?”

She did. The gentleman’s name was Mark Critch and he was a journalist who worked out of the island of Newfoundland, near Canada. Once upon a time, this man had been something of a popular comedian in Canada on their public broadcaster, until the privately owned networks, armed with reams of American programming, caused his show’s air time to be cut and then, finally, for it to be forced off the air entirely. Critch irrationally blamed our race for his show’s demise, seeing as his show had been scheduled against ones on which we performed and they had gotten better ratings than his, which is all the networks really care about, after all. Seeking revenge, Critch tracked down members of our race living in his country and forced them to reveal our secrets to him on pain of their destruction at his hands. When he had gathered as much material as he could that could be converted into book form, he did just that and sold it to a publisher sympathetic to his approach and ideas. He was apparently in the midst of working on the final proofs for the book even as we were speaking. And we had exactly one month before his influential Canadian publisher- which had powerful distribution affiliates in America and England- launched the text on an unsuspecting world- and ruined us in this process.

“So,” I mused when she had finished. “We’re facing the worst crisis of our history and we have no legal recourses or resources. What are we going to *do* about it?”

“Only one thing *to* do,” said Cadmium. “We have to resort to commando tactics.”

“Like what?” I said suspiciously, raising my eyebrows.

“Like we burn the fucker down inside his house!”

“Yeah! And then we roast him over an open fire with an apple in his mouth!”

“But first, we get all of his Newfie rum and give it to me!”

It was quite clear now that Duddy, Bess and Paul- the source, in order, of the above three comments- were all incredibly drunk, even by the heart-stopping alcohol consumption rates of some ‘toons off camera. And it was also clear to me that Cadmium was sober and not taking any of their guff, as I would not have myself were I still in her position.

“Shut up, you stupid lushes!” she barked at them. Then to me, she said: “It’s been like this all morning! Listen, if you want to take over...”

“Not a chance!” I said emphatically.

“Fine.” She composed herself, and a mask of serenity suddenly came over her. “What we are going to do is call a meeting of the membership, during which we will conduct a lottery to determine the members of the commando team which will be responsible for destroying that accursed document!” Suddenly, her face and tone took on a more satanic aspect, causing me to back up a bit. “We need to destroy any evidence that that goddamned book ever existed. Whoever gets the call to be involved has to wipe his computer, rip up his manuscripts, burn his proofs and his notes, steal all the copies of it from the warehouse before they get shipped to stores, send a computer virus to Amaco so they can’t put it up on their site- in short, anything to prevent that miserable excuse of a man from profiting off everything and everyone we hold so dear.”

I slapped her, hard, in the face to get her back to her senses.

“So,” she said, as if nothing had happened. “Can I get your guarantee that you will help to conduct the lottery?”

“No,” I answered.

“What?” She was genuinely shocked. “But your imprimatur is needed for...”

“...nothing! This cockamamie thing is all your idea, Ms. President and I don’t think people like me are going to appreciate being drafted for a fool’s errand. You made your bed on this, Cadmium- you can lie in it, too.”

“Have you forgotten about Orthicon?” she growled.

“No,” I responded. “But you have. This kind of bullshit is what screwed us there and it’ll screw us up again.”

“You traitorous little slut!”

She had started into calling me dirty names, but I wasn't listening. I was already gone.

## II.

Needless to say, the thing did go ahead and I did attend it along with my family, but my vow not to participate in it proved not to be honoured.

We held our meeting at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, where they used to hold the Academy Award ceremonies back in the day. Even with our vaunted celebrity status, my family and I could easily blend into a crowd that size- which is what I was hoping we could do that night. No luck there.

Cadmium explained the circumstances of the book and the lottery which was designed to choose the members of the commando group. Most of the audience gasped audibly at the news of the book's existence, so much so that it took a while to get order restored. Then the lottery itself began. It resembled the Shirley Jackson story, save for the ending.

"When I give the word," Cadmium said to us, "I want you to feel under the bottom of your seat. You will find a slip of paper attached to it. At the word, I want you to remove the slip of paper and-slowly open it. Seven of the pieces of paper will have an "X" in the center of them. If you are the holder of an "X", then you will be one of the group charged with destroying the book- and its author!"

She gave the word, and we removed the papers from the bottoms of our seats. Hearing my father and brother exclaim heartily and my mother moan in fear, I knew they had been chosen for the team and I feared the worst for myself. Sure enough, on my paper there was an "X", along with a hand-written message beneath it from Cadmium:

*HOPE YOU FREEZE YOUR ASS OFF IN NEWFIE-LAND, BITCH!*

You're the bitch, you back-stabber! I thought, as I furiously tore my paper to shreds, threw the remnants of it to the wind and stalked out of the room.

## III.

Soon afterwards, word began spreading amongst our community, not only about those who had been chosen for the raid, but about Mark Critch and his treachery against us, with the result that he gained an unflattering but

accurate sobriquet: The Thief Of Bad Gags. The idea behind that name was, since even we considered some of the comedy material we did kind of old hat, that, in stealing from us, he was essentially stealing trash. But, behind the levity that appeared on the surface was the deep-seated fear that all of us would soon be out of work - or worse - if the book were published and the truth about us spread around the world.

That being said, it was now up to my mother, my father, my brother and me and our three fellow draftees- the Suckerpunch Girls, of TV fame like us, of course- to attempt to persuade Critch to back off. If we even could.

You all know the Suckerpunch Girls by now, nearly as well as you probably do me (well, some of you, anyway.) Their superpowers and their stunning big-eyed little girl good looks are memorable, after all. Flotsam, with her commanding attitude and flaming red hair. Baubles, with her blond pigtails and perennially innocent looking and sounding demeanour. Betterfist, with the short black hair and the fists that always mean business. No, it's not that I'm envious of them - I admire them the same way kids of my chronological age are supposed to, but... We work for different studios and hit for different areas of the ballpark in terms of the makeup of our audiences. And their show's been out of production for quite a while now, while ours just goes on and on and on and on...

I got an atlas of Canada from the studio library and brought it back to our bungalow on the studio lot so we could go over it. (Yes, we make millions laugh, as the old saying goes, but the real joke is our salaries.) The point is, as soon as Flotsam, Baubles and Betterfist agreed to meet us after our filming day ended, I knew that, if we had our case for acting prepared in advance- for once- we could proceed with the job and it would be done fast and well.

No such luck.

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The first inkling of trouble came when the four of us Stinsons went over the map of Newfoundland I had selected for analysis. As he usually is, my father was unimpressed- and drunk.

"What the hell is this?" he said.

“It’s a map of Newfoundland, Dad,” I said. “We got drafted into dealing with the problem with the book. Remember? Last night?”

“Awww!” he moaned. “You mean we actually gotta go to this place?”

“It’s precisely what it means, Harold,” said my mother. “Didn’t you even pay attention to what they were saying?”

“Of course I did, Meryl!” Dad said. “At least at first. But after a while it got confusing and whatnot and I lost track...”

This was interrupted by my brother breaking into hysterical laughter upon looking at that map. Baron is usually like that- insensitive. I wasn’t surprised that he did that, but I still felt mad.

“What the hell is so funny, Baron?” I demanded.

“Sorry, Les’,” he said, briefly getting control of himself. “But these town names here! I mean, what idiot gave these places their names? “Come-By-Chance”? “Conception Bay”? “Gander”? “Trespassey”? “Dildo”? Somebody had something on their mind when they named these places!”

“Show some respect!” I admonished him. “It’s not like the people actually chose those names...” But by then, Mom and Dad had joined Baron’s chuckle-fest, fixating on Dildo in particular. I finally had to growl loudly and wordlessly at them to get their attention back.

“You may not think this is serious,” I said, “but it’s goddamned serious to me!”

“That’s your problem, Les’,” Baron said. “You’re always goddamned serious! Why don’t you lighten up?”

“I’ll lighten up once we get this finished!” I said. “And I especially want us to be ready before...”

Too late! The windows in front of us shattered before our eyes and the Suckerpunch Girls levitated above us.

They wore their usual respective red, blue and green outfits, which matched their eyes, and their dark black shoes. They faced us as they usually faced their enemies, with confidence born from a thousand other battles. But we weren’t their enemies- we could be their uneasy allies at best, or their antagonists at worst. This I already knew and I was prepared to deal with them within these terms. But Mom, Dad and Baron didn’t seem able to give them even this courtesy. They just stood there with their mouths open in fear of them, like they were aliens or something instead of cartoon

characters just like us. The fear my family had of them was made apparent when Dad screamed and Baron ducked behind Mom, with Mom suddenly wielding a wooden spoon in front of them in a futile effort at defence. I, however, was more than familiar with them from TV and the occasional in-person social and union meeting and I confronted them not as the super beings they were, but simply as my social equals- which is what they, in all likelihood, probably preferred.

“Don’t you ever knock?” I said, sternly.

They floated down from the air to the ground.

“Come off it, Leslie!” Betterfist said emphatically. “We do this all the time in Townsberg and nobody...”

“You’re not in Townsberg right now,” I answered. “You’re on our court now and you play by our rules. That means none of that fancy superhero defy-the-laws-of-everything stuff you’re always doing!”

“Damn it!” said Betterfist angrily. “Just because your goddamn show is still on the air...”

“Shut up, Betterfist!” Flotsam ordered in her best bitch-be-running-the-place voice. “They got drafted the same way we did and they’re prepared to work just as hard on this as we will. The fact that they have a program that’s still on the air and we don’t *is* of no consequence!”

Thank God she agrees with me, I thought. There would be trouble if she didn’t.

“So that’s it, huh?” snapped Betterfist. “We just do what the old farts tell us and it’ll be fine, huh?”

“Who are you calling an old fart, you little...” said Mom resentfully as she advanced threateningly towards Betterfist with spoon in hand. I groaned in horror and slunk to the background.

“Yeah,” Dad added, unhelpfully. “I’m the old fart around here and don’t you forget it!”

“Just try me, lady!” Betterfist warned Mom. “I’ll take you!”

Flotsam proceeded to kick Betterfist in the shin to get her to behave, while I glared silently at Mom and Dad from afar. Unfortunately, I failed to do the same to Baron and he, attracted to Baubles upon seeing her close up, made a non-verbal pass at her. Horrified, she took it the wrong way and responded by punching him soundly in the face. He flew across the living room and landed in the kitchen, unconscious. This started everyone else arguing and yelling with each other.



After absorbing as much of this as I could, I finally had enough. Grabbing my father's abandoned, half-empty bottle of Chardonnay, I went to the end of the coffee table where they were arguing, the argument now focusing on each other's imagined lineages. With the precision of John Henry using his hammer against the steam engine, I brought the bottle down on the edge of the table. As the glass and liquid shot through the air and the reverberations of the impact mingled with the acoustics of the room, I could finally say my piece.

"All right!" I said, prefacing a longer speech. "Everybody just shut up!"

At long last I had what I wanted. Silence. Glorious silence, such a rare commodity in our industry. I took a couple of extremely deep breaths into my bosom while wielding the broken bottle threateningly and then continued to speak further before they could object.

"I want you all to focus on the words coming out of my mouth," I snapped. "This fight we're in is bigger than all of us. We are dealing with the exposure of our true identities and the revelation of everything we hold dear and in secret to the world. This unscrupulous "author" is going to ruin us all. And I don't mean just the few of us in this room- I mean every single cartoon character on this planet! If people learn who and what we really are, what secrets and abilities we have, what's to stop them from copying us and robbing us of our very uniqueness? Who's gonna want to watch cartoon shows anymore if anyone can do the things only we can do for free in the real world?"

"And all you dimwitted morons can do is fight over which one of us is going to be hoisting the flag on Mount Suribachi- when we're all supposed to it, together! Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? At all?"

More silence ensued as they began to contemplate the gravity behind my words. For a brief moment, it seemed that there could be peace between us and we might be able to work together, after all.

But then, unfortunately, my father suddenly discovered that his wine bottle had been broken and, in panic, he tried to lap up what was left of his wine on the table with his tongue. We Stinsons were used to this type of pathetic display from Dad, but the Suckerpunch Girls' faces reflected their obvious revulsion to it.

"You..." Flotsam growled in anger, taking the red bow on her head off and beating my father savagely with it to get him to stop. "You are

disgusting!”

“Back off!” I said, trying to restore peace. “He just has a problem with...”

“You just noticed this?” Betterfist said angrily. In blind fury, she pulled Dad up in the air by what was left of his hair and dropped him soundly on the ground.

“Get your flaming act together, you wino!” she bellowed at him.

I do not know what motivated me to act in the way I did then, but I suddenly felt the kind of hatred for them that one only can for anyone, regardless of who they are, who has scared, intimidated or hurt your family.

“That’s it!” I snapped at the Girls, pointing at the door with the bottle. “Get out!”

The three of them turned to me, their large eyes displaying shock and intimidation for the first time that night.

“Excuse me?” Flotsam demanded. The tone implied that they weren’t used to being talked to like that.

“You heard me!” I roared. “You get the hell out of here! And take your bullying, jackbooted reign of terror with you!”

“How dare you...” Flotsam snarled.

“Oh, shut up, you arrogant little bitch!” I snapped. “I know what the three of you are like! There was a time when I liked you, respected you even. But now I just think you’re a team of super-powered, despicable thugs who beat up people to get what you want! Would you like it if I went over to your house and beat the shit out of your father, even if it he didn’t do anything to deserve it? Huh? Would you like that?”

“No!” said the Girls together suddenly, horrified.

“But that’s not the point,” said Flotsam, suddenly regaining her arrogant composure. “The point is...”

“This is exactly the point!” I said, silencing her. “I don’t care what the hell they let you get away with in the past. You may have been big shots before, but you’re not- not here and not now! And I will not work with, nor will I even associate with, beings with powers they don’t know how to use-except to scare and torment others!”

That cut them deep. Tears came to their eyes, but I was unmoved.

“But... we didn’t mean to...” Flotsam stammered.

“It doesn’t matter what you meant to do,” I said, throwing the bottle at them and missing. “You hurt and scared us and that is simply

unforgivable! Just get the hell out of here before I have to call the cops on you!”

They still didn't go anywhere.

“What are you? Deaf? I said get out!” And I threw the book at them. Literally. It was a dictionary. And it missed, but my point had been made.

Flotsam and Betterfist left right away, but Baubles stayed. She zipped towards me and cornered me, so I could not avoid seeing her blond hair and huge blue eyes, the latter full of tears.

“You used to be cool, Leslie!” she snapped at me in her deceptively mild little-girl voice. “At least I thought so, seeing you on television like that. Flotsam and Betterfist would tease me for liking you, ‘cause they always thought were a stuck-up, know-it-all bitch! And now...” a sob coloured her voice here “...now, I think they were right all along!” And she flew away after the others, bawling like an air raid siren all the way as she did.

No words anyone said to me during that time hurt me more- or gave me more food for thought- than those.

#### IV.

The next few days were busy, as we called on some studio connections to travel the thousands of miles we needed to go from L.A. to the international airport in Gander, setting in motion another set of supposedly clever ripostes from my family. But we still managed to make it to the small Canadian province intact, though our outward appearances clearly marked us as what the local people called “come-from-aways.” Not to mention the endless times we were asked how “she” was going, “b’y”? Even if it was a bit annoying, I was also able to see the charm in it, although my father was more scared of it than impressed.

“I can't deal with it here,” he confessed. “The men all talk like Popeye- and the women all look like Olive Oyl!”

“Look,” I promised him. “We just have to find Critch and talk to him and then it'll all be over.” That seemed to calm him down.

We followed the instructions Cadmium had given us and headed inward towards Critch's cabin on the shores of Conception Bay. That set off another round of bad jokes, but Critch's place was so remote that the others had completely used up their material by the time we got there.

There was a small obstacle in our path, however. We soon discovered that there was a moat surrounding the terrain on which Critch supposedly was camping out in. There was no bridge or any other similar edifice on which to cross to the other side. My family looked with puzzlement at this predicament, but I had a plan. I took off my socks and shoes and began wandering into the path of the moat, which came up to my knees. They, however, did not move.

“What are you waiting for?” I demanded. “Come on! This is serious.”

“Are you crazy?” Dad said. “We might drown, y’know!”

“We’ll either die or be put out of work if we don’t!” I said, giving them an ultimatum. “Do you want that?”

They did not. So they took their shoes off and followed me across.

After locating Critch’s hideout, a rough-hewn shack on a hill miles from anywhere inhabitable, I took a deep breath, steadied myself and knocked on the door.

It opened and the man revealed himself.

Critch was a stocky but compact Caucasian man with a firm chin and blazing Irish eyes. His head was shaped like a phallus and a balding pate of hair was arranged symmetrically around it. He had on what appeared to be the only suit of clothes he had brought with him, for it was heavily weathered. Even my father could tell that the guy had probably had one too many, as he likely was entitled to as the author of a soon-to-be published book. But that didn’t excuse the fact that he was going to profit at our expense- and we meant to rectify that.

In any event, he revealed himself and he didn’t like what he saw.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” he screamed in a guttural “Newfie” accent that we had become familiar with from our short time on the island.

“No, no, no- you’ve got it wrong!” said my father, sheepishly trying to correct the error he saw in the man’s statement. “I’m Harold, she’s Meryl, he’s Baron and she’s Leslie. I don’t know who those people you were talking about are, but, man, the way you said their names, they really must’ve ripped you off...”

“I knows who you are!” Critch snapped. “You’re the bloody royal family of Hell!”

“That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think?” said my mother, lips puckering in anger. “We only...”

“Shut the hell up, you spawn of the devil!”

Critch had produced a 12-gauge shotgun from out of nowhere and had cocked it. We had no choice but to put up our hands.

“You gets the hell inside here before I has to plug the whole lot of you!” he said. “I gots enough bullets to kill all of you, so don’t try nothin’ dumb!” We’d been through this before, on film and in our “real” lives, so we weren’t going to do anything stupid enough to risk getting shot by a mad man. A soon-to-be published author, yes, but a mad man just the same.

When we were inside, Critch shut the door behind us and poured himself a shot of rum from a decanter on his table, all the while keeping the shotgun poised on us. We, meanwhile, sought all of our inner resources to confront him- or, at least, I did. I’d call the situation a Mexican standoff, but we were in Newfoundland, so that doesn’t really work.

“Can I...?” my father asked.

“No!” said Critch, in a tone lacking in hospitality. “You gets your ‘toon hands off me rum, you bastard!” That shut Dad up for a while, so it was my turn to talk.

“Mr. Critch,” I said as calmly as I could, “you don’t seem to realize the size of the can of worms you’re opening...”

“Oh, I knows pretty damn well what I’m opening, child,” he said. “Would I have written the cursed book if I didn’t?”

“You wrote it so you could make money- off of our backs!” I said accusingly.

That did it!

He started firing blindly at me and the others, but, as is customary with us ‘toons, the bullets simply past through our bodies without leaving any marks on us- or us feeling any wounds. When Critch finally ran out of bullets, he threw the gun down on the ground in disgust.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” he shouted again in drunken rage.

“He must really hate those people!” my father said in an all-too audible aside to Mom.

“I don’t hate them, you stupid knob!” Critch said. “It’s you and your whole kind I hate!”

“Why?” I asked. “What did we ever do to...”

“You did plenty to me, you did!” Critch snarled back at me. “I had me the best thing going and I lost it all ‘cause of you!” Then, without asking or prompting from us, he started telling his story.

“You ever been to St. John’s?”

“No, man,” said Baron. “We came in through Gander...”

“Don’t interrupt me!” Critch raged. “You been spewin’ your vile words for so long it’s hurting the world! But now yer gonna shut up and listen to me talk! “I asked you if you been to St. John’s because it’s bloody hell there. Bloody hell! I couldn’t wait to leave that bloody cesspool, so I stole money and headed out for Halifax as soon as I could. It wasn’t New York or nothin’, but it was still better. I started doing comedy in the clubs, riffing on the people and stuff I left behind. Then I got me a gig doing satire on the CBC. I got popular and famous real quick. I took down all the big politicians and Hollywood movie folk and that and told ‘em all who was really the boss in this world! I got me money and houses and cars and women and so many other good things like that...”

“Then... then... you came along! You and that whole fucking tribe of animated vultures! You Stinsons, and those Gutmans and them Sneads and all those accursed perverse freaks of nature they calls “funny” animals. Hah! And they was all funded by them fucking Americans, just like you bastards! And them Americans keep tryin’ to push us honest Canadians out of business. I knows that ‘cause it happened to me, b’y! Soon as my show got scheduled against you freaks my ratings ended up in the fucking toilet and the fucking CBC canned my ass! They wanted to get into the act of putting out ‘toon shows in that timeslot, too, ‘cept they at least had the decency not to farm out the shit to Americans!

“So I ended up not having any more money left and I lost all I had and I hadda come back here. But I knew you guys were hiding something the moment I saw ya for the first time and I aimed to find out about it. I went onto the websites and chat-rooms and whatnot about you and got all the dirt I needed on you from there. How you was all descended from fairies from the British Isles. How you could defy chemistry and physics and all that science stuff, like that shit with the bullets you just pulled- I was just foolin’ ya with that business with gun, but I needed to intimidate you to get you in here, y’understand. And, especially, how the whole lot of you been camped out in Hollywood for years and years and years, preying on the hearts and minds of innocent children with yer heartless, mindless ways!

“Sure, I needed the money I would’ve got from the royalties and all, but getting rid of all of you bastards became more important to me when I learned that last part. I could drive all of you off of TV the way St. Patrick

hissself drove the snakes out of Ireland. And me publisher, he's all for it, 'cause his kid shot hissself imitatin' something one of you did on one of your blasted shows! No better motivation than that, huh?

"So I knows all of yer damn secrets now and I'll make 'em public, and you can't do shit about it! Especially since I also knows how to get rid of you forever!"

He did, as did we. The only thing that can truly kill our race is exposure to fire. Each of us carries in the core of our bodies a mass of nitrate film stock beneath our ink-and-paint exteriors and, if we are ever closely exposed to flame, we burn up and crumble into dust. Which was exactly what Critch intended to do, as he prepared to apply flame from a cigarette lighter onto a rag he had soaked in oil.

"I'm sending the final proof off to the publisher in Toronto in the morning," he said, gesturing to his laptop in the farthest corner of the room, on top of a work desk. "And wouldn't it be nice for the publisher to hear that I'd killed off the Stinsons in the bargain as well!"

We almost certainly would have been killed and I would not be here to write this, had he managed to toss that oily rag on us and burn us to death. But, instead, the stillness of that dark night was suddenly broken by a stern female voice barking out

"Don't you dare!"

A window at the east corner of the shack had been opened, unbeknownst to all of us. And there, standing there with legs akimbo and faces frozen into humourless masks, like they owned the place, were the Suckerpunch Girls.

But why, I wondered? After the cussing out I gave them, why had they come here? And how was it possible that they knew where we were- and exactly where to find us?

I had only a minute to ponder this, however, before Critch turned his gaze away from us and towards them, seemingly as flabbergasted to see them as he had been to see us.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" he exclaimed.

"Watch your mouth, buddy!" Flotsam snapped.

"Yeah!" Baubles added, unhelpfully. "Those aren't our names!" The other two glared at her and then Flotsam continued addressing Critch.

"We know what you're going to do, Critch," she said, "and you might as well cut it out! You're not going to get away with it!"

“And what makes you believe that you are going to stop me, you three nose-less little brats?” Critch snorted. “The three of you together probably don’t even weight as much as me!” Then he chuckled humourlessly. “And I knows, as a good Catholic man should, where the likes of you belong! ‘Specially the ones that ain’t hit puberty yet!”

“You drunken son-of-a...” Betterfist cursed, but Flotsam signalled to her angrily in a non-verbal fashion and she temporarily withdrew.

“We expected that,” Flotsam said tersely, “from the likes of you!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Critch.

“What do you think it means, you moron?” added Baubles. “You’re evil!”

“And we eat evil for breakfast,” concluded Betterfist.

“You think I’m evil?” snapped Critch. “Me, who ain’t even been to prison in my life? You ain’t never been to Ottawa. The real crooks is all there, they is!”

“We’re not interested in Ottawa,” said Flotsam. “It’s you we want. You know a lot about us, Critch, but you’re not in the least prepared to do anything to help or aid us. Instead, you want to discredit all of us ‘toons in the eyes of the public, drive us into the shadows we only recently escaped and claim all of our wealth and glory for your own like the thief you are! Well, you’re not getting that chance!”

Two beams of hot, red light exited her eyes at that moment- red light that was aimed directly at Critch’s laptop- and promptly reduced it to ashes.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” Critch shouted after getting up from the floor after ducking to avoid the red light. “You’ve ruined me! My whole damn book was on that machine! Ah, well, I can probably still use my paper notes to...”

“You mean these?” Betterfist said, suddenly holding a high stack of paper in her hands. In seconds, she had torn all of it to scraps. “Take that, jerk!” she added, throwing the remnants into Critch’s face.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” Critch shouted again, in anguish this time.

“Who are those people?” whispered Dad to me as we watched in the background. “His family or something?”

“Tell you later,” I said resignedly.

Critch, meanwhile, was now truly infuriated. He removed his belt from his pants and began wielding it as a weapon against the Girls.



“I knows how to deal with you career-wreckers!” he shouted. “The same way me father used to discipline me in the old days!”

With whip-like accuracy that would have impressed Indiana Jones, he swung out and hit Betterfist square in the face with the belt. She shouted in pain and fell down to the floor with a large loop-shape welt suddenly visible on her face. Flotsam came after him for that and got the same treatment with the same results. What was going on? Weren’t they supposed to be invulnerable to these things? Weren’t we, too?

“Hah!” Critch snapped. “Thought I wasn’t prepared for you, huh? I ain’t as much of a fool as you think me! Me research let me know how to deal with the likes of you. Any human that attacks a ‘toon wearing clothing blessed by a priest can fight them on their own terms! And I got all me clothes blessed just ‘fore I came out here to write me book- in case any of you buggers tried to stop me! And now I’m gonna.. bloody hell! Somebody be pullin’ at me hair! Who’s doin’ that?”

“Me, you meanie!”

Baubles squeaked out that line with the most violent indignation she could possibly manage and took even Critch aback with her courage as he turned around and saw her coming towards him.

“You will not continue to harm my friends if you wish to live!” she roared.

Critch aimed his belt angrily at her, but she was too fast for him, and he missed. She did not, however. A staggering uppercut, not unlike the one she’d used on my brother before, sent him reeling across the room. He crashed into a stone fireplace, twitched in agony for a few seconds and then finally lay still.

Unfortunately for us, Critch’s collision with the fireplace upset a bottle of kerosene on the mantle, which promptly crashed to the floor. Immediately, the kerosene trickled across the floor and soon hit the oil-soaked rag Critch had dropped on the ground. In seconds, the shack caught on fire, and we were all doomed!

Or at least, I thought so.

We Stinsons started panicking like headless chickens as soon as the flames came out, knowing they’d get on us soon enough. But the Suckerpunch Girls were fearless and they knew exactly what to do. With astonishing bursts of their unique superhuman energy, they picked us all up

by our collars and flew us out the closed window at the farthest end of the room- just as a tremendous explosion blew the shack to smithereens!

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“Why?” I insisted on knowing. “Why did you come back? And how did you find us?”

The Girls had kindly offered us a lift (and I do mean a lift) back to Hollywood after rescuing us from Critch’s shack, but I insisted that they tell us the reasoning behind their actions, especially after the intolerable way I had acted towards them. To this end, we made a pit stop on the outskirts of Halifax.

“First of all,” Flotsam explained, “we were still committed to this project after you cussed us out. Like you said, Leslie, it concerned everybody in the ‘toon community, not just the seven of us. And we’re not the types who abandon a job before it’s finished. Second, we knew you were going to Newfoundland since Critch was there and most of the town knew about him after the lottery meeting anyway. So that was a no-brainer. While you guys were flying commercial into Gander, we were doing reconnaissance, going everywhere from St. John’s to Corner Brook where he might have the potential of showing up. No luck there- the man had gone hermit on us in the shack. Then, when you arrived in Gander, we shadowed you. I didn’t know if Leslie was still mad at us, so I made sure we didn’t reveal ourselves. We’d already pinpointed where Critch’s shack was before you found it, so it was just a simple matter of lying in wait until the slimy jerk revealed himself and his plan to you.”

“But how could you possibly have gone...” Mom interjected.

“D-uh... Hello! We have superpowers, remember?” Betterfist said, answering her question before she had even finished.

“Right,” said Mom sheepishly. “I forgot that.”

“Anyway,” Flotsam finished, glaring a bit at Betterfist as she did, “that’s about it.”

“But after all I did... and said...” I put in.

“Please don’t beat yourself up about that, Leslie,” Baubles said in a concerned tone. “We realize now that it was as much our fault as it was yours. We don’t deal with ‘toons- or humans, for that matter- like you very much. You know, blunt cynical types. And we couldn’t deal with it well.”

“The feeling is mutual,” said Dad, pulling his collar nervously.

“Still,” I said, “it was my fault that things went so bad...”

“Listen, you!” Betterfist insisted to me, firmly. “All of us screwed up on this. No amount of you saying otherwise is gonna change that. We’re just two packs of lone wolves, used to fighting our own battles and taking care of ourselves. We just smashed into a wall called each other, is all. We fought in the past, but we don’t have to now. That’s all it was and all it is. The only thing you can do about the past is just accept it and move on.”

“You know, you could have just left us there,” Baron added, looking shamefully at Baubles. “After the crappy things we did and said to you...”

“Please!” Baubles replied, looking forgivingly at Baron. “That’s never an option- especially for friends and acquaintances- you kinda being a bit of both to us now.”

“The thing is,” Flotsam continued, “you aren’t superheroes like us. And we find it hard to get people who don’t know anything about us and who we really are. Where we have to go and who we have to be and all the frustrating things we have to deal with, you know?”

“I know,” I responded. “It’s your job to deal with all the bad things in your world so we don’t have to deal with them in ours- or anywhere else. And we need as many of you as there are to keep it that way.”

“And we need people like you, too,” added Flotsam. “You understand us, when we make good and when we slip up. I saw that when you stood up to us- those kinds of things are what heroes are really made of, super or otherwise. You guys may not be superheroes, but you’re not so bad in your own way.”

“Thanks,” I said, genuinely moved by their words. Then I opened my arms to them. “Hugs?”

“Sure!” they said together, enthusiastically.

The four of us embraced, while my father, mother and brother stood awkwardly to the side until I beckoned them over with a free arm.

“See, girls,” Baubles said. “She’s not such a stuck-up bitch after all!”

“That’s fine,” said my father, suddenly twitching in pain. “But somebody’s cracking my ribs! And I still don’t know who Jesus, Mary and Joseph are!”

Our joint mission accomplished and our joint fears and concerns about each other vanquished, there was nothing more any of us could do

upon hearing my father's words but breaks into peals of laughter that joyously echoed across the coast of the Atlantic Ocean.

## Dogs at Midnight

### *Dave Fragments*

His dogs howled. His dogs never howled. This was Halloween night; a moonless night made blacker by rain. No one came to this dark, rundown house, not happy, eager Trick-or-Treaters or adventure-seeking teenage boys with eggs and soap in hand. No birds of the air built their nests on the eaves. No lights beckoned through its wavy windows. The creaky gate and unmowed lawn kept the foolish away and chased the dead. Even the demons sensed his presence and stayed away. The Mark disturbed the living, made them twitchy, apprehensive.

Ayden looked up from his book. The hall clock struck midnight and his dogs howled again. Something stood on his porch. He went to the front door and opened an iron-barred peephole. Two eyes floated in the air, burning with the fires of Hades. Ayden scowled at his unexpected guest, closed the peephole and yelled through the door.

“You should have called! I wouldn't be sitting here in my underwear with the door bolted reading a book by the fireplace and you wouldn't be standing outside my door freezing your ass off in the cold cruel rain.”

“Is that the greeting you give to a guest?” a disembodied voice deep enough to penetrate all of creation answered. The door shivered as the sound passed through it. Ayden unlatched the iron locks that protected his home from creatures born before the rule of man. He opened the door as a head formed around the floating eyes. The voice became corporeal. A mass of black curls hung over a thin face, pale skin stretched over half-formed bones, pencil-thin legs supported an impossibly thin waist.

“You're getting careless in your old age, stepfather. My faithful old hounds heard you arrive.”

“Old? I was old when the universe was young and compared to my hounds, you're an insolent pup.” One eye winked.

“Stubborn old man,” Ayden said, watching the man's body take form. It was average height, fleshy, muscular, about twenty-five years old, olive skinned and well endowed. It was his body but someone else's body. Ayden sighed.

“It is my nature to be stubborn. Am I to stand here naked?”

“You are welcome to enter the house of Ayden Cain,” he said, bowing low and making an extravagant and grandiose gesture to satisfy the rules of the Universe. This was Death come knocking at his door. Not Death with a hood and scythe, not Death who comes to us all in the night, not Death the Master of all living things, but Death his adoptive father.

“You look well, my son.” Death stepped across the threshold and stood in the foyer, a fleshy, handsome young man, his body overflowing with the vigor of youth. Ayden closed the door, smiling. This wasn’t a social visit. Death does not visit uninvited at midnight on the night of nights when locked doors open for those with evil in their hearts. Unafraid, Ayden looked directly into the twin infernos of Death's eyes.

“As do you, stepfather. It's been too long. Is this a busman's holiday?” Death wrapped his new arms around Ayden's shoulders and hugged. Ayden rested his head on the broad chest. This was the first physical contact Ayden had in years. He let the caress go on for several minutes.

“I am in need of your assistance, Ayden. First, for clothing and second, to prevent the end of the world.”

“Surely we have a few hours before it ends.”

“Yes, this body is hungry and desires food. It craves a mocha-chocolate-grande with sprinkles and whipped cream, whatever that is. And it craves steak, ale, potatoes with cheese sauce and something called a SacherTorte.” Death smiled a pleasant and happy smile. Ayden rubbed his hand over the top of his head, shrugged, somewhat embarrassed.

“I have bargain-brand coffee, leftover beef stew, imported Mexican beer rather than the yeast piss brewed in America and apricot jam over a Klondike bar. That's the best I can do on short notice.”

“It will be a gourmet's repast, an epicurean delight, a gastronomist's-”

Ayden cut off Death's musing and pulled away.

“Don't go all touchy-feely on me, old man. If we're not getting bloody, pick from the good clothes in my closet. Otherwise, the old stuff is in the hall closet.” Ayden went to the kitchen to heat the stew. A few minutes later, Death returned. He wore Ayden's old clothing - a tight tank top and pair of well-worn jeans, his attitude announcing “rough trade.” Ayden shook his head and made silly faces at Death.

“That’s a new look. What happened to your usual outfit?” Ayden set the table and looked at the leftovers heating in the microwave.

“I’ll explain after dinner. I want you to visit old man Schliemann, your neighbor down the road. Tell him an errant muse and not Death whispered in that young songwriter’s ear years ago and your hounds are not harbingers of death when they howl at midnight.” They shared a laugh at Mister Schliemann’s expense. Ayden removed the food and slid it onto Death’s plate.

“That’s funny. I’ve never seen him step beyond his porch. His wife says that he has the black lung and fears the day he dies.” Inwardly, he prayed for the day when Death would come to take him.

“Tell him Death says to sleep soundly. When I come for him, he will greet me as if I was a long-lost son with a fatted calf, expensive wines and his joy will last an eternity.” Death ate like a ravenous wolf, sloppy, noisy and thoroughly enjoying the food.

“That might kill him outright.” Ayden opened the freezer, flipped a Klondike bar out of its wrapper and onto a dish. He slopped a spoon of yellowish marmalade jelly on the chocolate coating and topped it with a squirt of whipped cream from a can. Ayden set the plate on the table with a flourish normally reserved for elegance and royalty. Death wiped his lips and took the dish in both hands, lips quivering and tears forming.

“My son, the chef!” Death said, his voice cracking with insincerity.

“You bastard.” Ayden laughed and cracked open a bottle of beer. “For that, you have to tell me about the second thing, the unimportant thing; the end of the world thing.”

Death sighed and drank.

“The Book of Daniel prophesizes that the crown of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, destroyer of nations, both chosen and damned of Jehovah, will be found in Akkadia. A crown of immense power.”

Ayden’s lips formed a big “O.”

“The old legends say the crown is a shard from Gabriel’s sword after his battle with Sammael and-”

“No shit. That’s unfortunate.”

Death finished the thought. “The man who wears the crown gains the power of life and death, power sufficient to challenge the gods of creation.”

“I thought you guys found all of that magical holy-horseshit junk and destroyed it.”

“Apparently not. Some of the gods and demi-gods are downright suckers for shiny baubles.” Death finished eating the Klondike ice cream bar. He leaned back on two legs of the chair and belched. “Nebu was a doddering old fool with a pretty wife. She wanted all things gold and sparkly. He sealed the crown in a golden box with three silver keys and made it the cornerstone of the Hanging Gardens.”

“Should have thrown it in the royal crapper,” Ayden said.

Death gave Ayden a shit-eating, ‘gotcha’ grin and touched his index finger to his nose.

“Right answer. His successor did just that but an intrepid archeologist dug it out a few weeks ago.”

Ayden rolled his eyes and splayed both hands to either side of his face. He pretended to be a little boy.

“Daddy, Daddy what did you do today? Well, son, today I dug up a moldy old king's 2500 year-old shit to find a crown that will let me destroy you, the world, your Momma and our little doggie Fifi. Aren't you proud of me?” Ayden laughed.

“He’s preparing the sacrifice as we speak.”

“Always a sacrifice,” Ayden said, no longer happy. Death stood, opened a cabinet and picked out a tea tin, Ayden’s stash.

“Maui Wowie?” Death asked, acting blasé. Ayden shook his head negatively.

“Better, Mexicali Nu-cue-lar, rolled on the loins of virgin Aztecs. Guaranteed to put a smile on your face no matter what. I bought it special. Just to take the edge off dying.” Ayden opened the tin and shook out a cigar-sized doobie. He lit the end, took a drag and handed it to Death. Death took a drag deep enough to stone an elephant, turned bluish and tried to cough up a lung. His eyes, once hellfire red, dilated to soft amber.

“Dis shit's strong... So this is a high? I never seen these colors. I feel, happy and I never feel happy. Why, I'm high enough to die, so die I will. Got some taco cheesies? I want taco cheesies.” Death rambled and giggled long enough to curdle a dead man's heart if one had been around to hear it. Ayden took his own deep drag.

“The older I get the more these little forays into human sacrifice hurt. Anymore I need a good strong hit to keep going.” Ayden nodded the



go-ahead. Death set a hand on his shoulder and caused the transformation. Ayden's body stiffened and his flesh quivered. His skeleton changed. Fat dissolved. Muscles contracted. His body became tighter, more compact - new face, new hair, veined arms bursting with muscle, a body just barely adult. A fresh body eager to move and react not tired from centuries of drudgery and pain, a body not much more than twenty years old. He caught a glimpse of coal-black hair, his olive skin visible on strong hands. He guessed that his new face was the younger brother of Death's incarnation. He took a final hit from the doobie.

"I recommend dying wasted," Ayden said. He made the excuse sound brave but both knew it was false bravado, cowardice even. No organ or cell in Ayden's body would ever be responsible for his death, would ever let him die, would ever be less than part of his punishment. It was an unforeseen consequence of his fall and subsequent damnation.

The words forever etched in his mind.

Fratricidium. Maledictus.

A curse upon you, upon your soul, upon your very being. A dead brother's blood cries out for justice. The dirt that received it cries for vengeance. From this day and for all time the dirt of the earth will rebuff you. Your plantings will lie fallow. All creation will know your sin. All creation will call you exile. A curse be on you and your offspring. Shame will decorate your door. Dread and foreboding betoken your path. This scourge will stalk you all the days of your life. Lest any creature living or dead find you, desire your life, the curse will deny you the solace of death. If any man slays you, vengeance shall be taken on him and his family for seven generations. Civilization will cast you out to wander unloved.

*This is the judgment of the Lord your God. I who created the stars of the sky, parted the light and the dark, numbers the birds of the air, who cares for the least of creation even the lilies of the field. I, who made man in his image, proclaim this judgment upon you now and forever, to stand beyond the deaths of men, beyond the end of the stars in the heavens, beyond the end of time itself.*

Such was the life of Ayden Cain.

Dreamy-eyed, Death waited while Ayden placed the dishes in the sink, threw the beer bottles in the trash, turned the lights down, checked the door locks and last of all, changed into Levis and tank top to match Death's

kit. In the darkness of his house Ayden took one look in a mirror hidden behind a door, one look to see a body stolen from the other side of life.

“I can sever the nerves to take the pain away,” Death offered.

“No, the pain of death I can handle. It’s life that makes me sad.”

He took Death's hand. Coldness filled the air; their hearts skipped a beat, as the shadows parted. It was like taking a sidelong glance when you see movement where nothing exists or the flash of light where only dark should be. These are the hidden places of creation where disorder rules; unwatched corners where a mote of dust dancing in a lonely beam of sunlight can be an entire universe. Death and his sometimes servant, sometimes son, Ayden Cain - son of Adam, brother of Abel, accursed of God Almighty - traveled through space and time to find the plot to end the world and thwart it with his impossible death.

## **Meet The Authors:**

**Olivia Arieti** is a US citizen with a degree from the University of Pisa. She lives in Torre del Lago Puccini, Italy with her family. Her plays and poems have been published both in the USA and UK. Her short stories have appeared in The Smoking Poet, Enchanted Conversations, Daily Bites Of Flesh 2011, Voices From The Garage, Riverbabble, Halloween Anthology Magic Cat Press, Christmas Warmth Anthology Xoxo Publishing, Medieval Nightmares, Poe-It and Spring Fever, Static Movement Anthologies.

**Shaun Avery** is a horror and crime fiction fan with a few prose competition wins to his name, as well as numerous publications on the UK small press comic scene. He hopes this story does not ruin the ever popular 'twins' fantasy for too many people.

**Dene Bebbington** works in IT but feels more at home writing horror fiction. Since becoming a fiction writer two years ago he's had horror and sci-fi short stories published in various print anthologies and e-zines. Now he's working on a zombie novelette to be published on Kindle, if he doesn't keep being distracted by writing stories like the one in this anthology.

**Patricia (Anabel) Burton** of Slovak origin spends her free time dreaming up dark twists and verses and creating bespoke jewellery inspired by her love for vampiric and gothic culture. Her poetry and a short story appeared in anthologies Hell, Grave Robbers, Serial Killers Tres Tria, Bones, Ugly Babies 2 (James Ward Kirk Publishing) and in Static Movement's Gothic Poetry and Flash Fiction. Her work is also featured online, in December issue of The Sirens Call eZine – Dead & Dying.

**Francesca Angelique Carrillo** is currently working as an assistant editor at a small publishing company in Singapore. She likes to write in her free time and read horror and fantasy novels.

**Dave Fragments** retired to the countryside of Western Pennsylvania amid the deer, squirrels and his imagination to write short stories. He is published in anthologies from Psychopomp, Static Movement, Red Skies Press, Fantastic Horror, Darkened Horizons, and online at The WiFiles, Kalkion,

Perihelion, Golden Visions, Tiny Globule, Yankee Pot Roast, and Flashquake. An occasional poem is available but rare. Dave used to conduct research into coal liquefaction and heterogeneous catalysis and that has morphed into horror, Sci-Fi and Fantasy about robots, strange transformations, demons and satyrs, cavorting simians, the Undead, time travel, devilish happenings and Cthulhu visitations.

**David Frazier** wrote a short story for the book, *Kindred Voices 2* published by the University of Massachusetts. He has written poetry for editor/publisher James Ward Kirk of Indianapolis, IN and is featured in his books: *Indiana Horror 2012* and *Indiana Science Fiction 2012*. *Harvest Time: Inwood Indiana* printed a poem of his. His poems will be printed in several *Static Movement* anthologies.

**A.A. Garrison** is a twenty-nine-year-old man living in the mountains of North Carolina. His short fiction has appeared in dozens of small-press zines and anthologies, and the Pseudopod horror webcast. His first novel, *The End of Jack Cruz*, is available from Montag Press. He blogs at [synchroshock.blogspot.com](http://synchroshock.blogspot.com).

**Ken Goldman**, former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies, is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore. His stories have appeared in over 700 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK and Australia with over thirty due for publication in 2013-14. Since 1993 Ken's tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. He has written five books: three anthologies of short stories, *YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!!* (Sam's Dot Publishers), *DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE* (A/A Productions) and *STAR-CROSSED* (Vampires 2); and a novella, *DESIREE*, (Damnation Books). His first novel *OF A FEATHER* (Horrific Tales Publishing) was released in January 2014. Please hold your applause until the royalty checks arrive.

**A J Humpage** has short stories and poetry published in anthologies like *6 Sentences*, *Pill Hill Press*, *Static Movement* and many e-zines. She dispenses writing advice at <http://allwritefictionadvice.blogspot.com>. Her work can be

found at <http://ajhumpage.blogspot.com> and Twitter: AJHumpage. Her novel, Blood of The Father, is available on Amazon Kindle.

**Ken Goldman**, former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies, is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore depending upon his mood and the track of the sun. His stories have appeared in over 640 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK and Australia with over twenty due for publication in 2012-13.

**Jeff Jones** has been writing on and off for most of his life and has been published some 50 times both online and in print anthologies, including many of Static Movement's. He has also won prizes in a number of writing competitions. He loves writing short ghost/horror stories, but rarely reads them, preferring instead to immerse himself in good historical fiction by someone like Simon Scarrow or Anthony Riches. [www.jeffajones.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.jeffajones.blogspot.co.uk)

**Ken L. Jones** has been professionally active in the world of popular culture for the past thirty years. He has worked as a writer and producer in TV and movies, most notably with Brian Yuzna. He has contributed many short stories and poems to the House Of Horror online magazine.

**Kevin L. Jones** has been involved with the creative arts for many years and has co-written several comic books. He has contributed several short stories to House of Horror and their anthologies DEADication and Soup of Souls as well as co-authoring the short story collection Mind Rotting Tales available from Panic Press.

**Ron Koppelberger** is a poet, short story writer and artist. He has written 103 books of poetry over the past several years and 18 novels. His art is viewable on Facebook under [will806095@bellsouth.net](https://www.facebook.com/will806095@bellsouth.net).

**Neil Leckman** lives in Colorado with his wife of more than thirty years and only recently began writing seriously. He does it for fun, to share with others and hopes you enjoy the ride.

**Thomas Malafarina** ([www.ThomasMMalafarina.com](http://www.ThomasMMalafarina.com)) is an author of horror fiction from Berks County, Pennsylvania. To date he has published four horror novels as well as for collections of horror short stories. He has also published a book of often strange single panel cartoons. All of his books have been published through Sunbury Press. ([www.Sunburypress.com](http://www.Sunburypress.com)).

**Jordan Elizabeth Mierek's** short stories and poetry are published in *Short-Story. me*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Writing Raw*, *Dark and Dreary Magazine*, *Storyhouse*, *the Magical Library*, *RiverSedge* and *AboutTeens*. Her work has won awards in *The Xpress* and Utica Writers Club.

**Konstantine Paradias** is a Greek science fiction and fantasy writer. His short stories in English have been published in Schlock! Magazine, OHP's Petulant Parables anthology, Breatless Press' Shifters anthology, Everydayfiction.com and his first fantasy book, Stone Cold Countenance, has been published by [bibliocracy.com](http://bibliocracy.com)

**David Perlmutter** is a freelance writer based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The holder of an MA degree from the Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, and a lifelong animation fan, he has published short fiction in a variety of genres for various magazines and anthologies, as well as essays on his favorite topics for similar publishers. He is the author of the upcoming book *America Toons In: A History of Television Animation* (McFarland and Co.) and of the currently available *The Singular Adventures Of Jefferson Ball* (Chupa Cabra Press).

**Jason Sturner** grew up along the Fox River in Illinois. He currently lives near the Great Smoky Mountains. Of his many jobs, the most interesting were elevator operator, rock drummer, bird bander, graphic designer and botanist. His stories and poems have appeared in *Space and Time Magazine*, *Star\*Line*, *Tales of the Talisman*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Liquid Imagination*, and *Bewildering Stories*, among others. Website: [www.jasonsturner.blogspot.com](http://www.jasonsturner.blogspot.com)

**Tim Tobin** holds a degree in mathematics from LaSalle University and has retired from L-3 Communications. Fifty short stories and poems are published. He is a member of the South Jersey Writer's Group and of the Dead Poets Society of Camden County College.

**Carmen Tudor** writes genre and lit fiction from Melbourne, Australia. “Brother” was written for a short story class several years ago and although it remained locked away as one of those homeless “dysfunctional sibling stories,” she waited patiently for an anthology that recognized the importance of family in all its various forms. Carmen, for the record, loves her family very much.

**Tim Wilkinson** has been writing since the age of twelve. After spending thirty years working in the telecommunications industry, traveling and writing in between the often conflicting commitments of family, work, home and life in general, he now focuses more time and effort on his most enduring dream, writing. Collections of his earlier works are available online, through Amazon-dot-com.

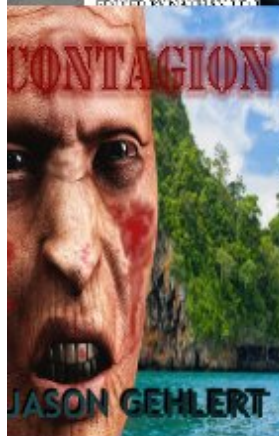
**Matthew Wilson** is a UK resident who has written since an early age. Recently these stories have escaped to the general public via magazines and ezines. He juggles two jobs and one novel into some kind of order while wishing there was 25 hours in the day.

**Michelle Worthington** has had several poems and short stories published and hopes to have many more published over the coming years.

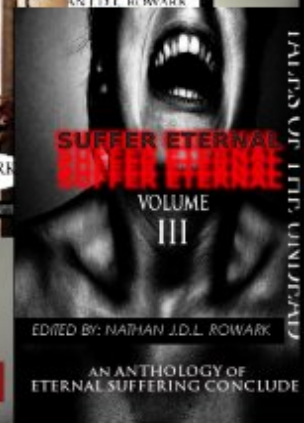




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